No Such Thing as Society

Neoliberalism and Crime in the Literature of Johannesburg, London, and Atlanta

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This article looks at literary texts set in Johannesburg (Ivan Vladislavić, Portrait with Keys), London (Ian McEwan, Saturday) and Atlanta (FX series Atlanta, created by Donald Glover) to articulate the impact of neoliberalism in each text's depiction of crime and communal urban society. By examining both how characters in each text react to crime, as well as how neoliberalism creates ripe conditions for actions deemed criminal by the state, this article takes cues from Margaret Thatcher's aphorism, "There is no such thing as society," to make the argument that though neoliberalism has failed in destroying community in many ways, there are routes back to a future in which we can again imagine a society built on solidarity, trust, and human flourishing.

Introduction

What follows is a story familiar to any and every 21st century urban dweller, in its broad sweeps if not its particularities.

In the summer of 2023, I received a jury summons for Fulton County, Georgia, where I live, a place which is often painted as "crime-infested" and "in horrible shape" by personalities as illuminous as former president Donald J. Trump. Though I live in the city of Atlanta proper, Fulton County encompasses a number of suburban communities and enclaves, many of those quite wealthy. Though jury duty is no one's idea of a particularly good time, I woke up on the assigned morning and went to do my civic duty.

Because I live quite close to the courthouse, I found it easiest to walk the short distance, though I had been mailed parking vouchers for a remote lot that was connected to the court house via shuttle bus if I desired. While waiting in line to check in, a woman nudged me.

"Could you *believe* how much they charged us for parking? I live in Alpharetta [one of the aforementioned suburban communities] and it took *forever* to get here, and then to pay for parking on top of that!"

"Oh," I responded, genuinely confused, "they mailed us those parking vouchers! Did you not receive them?"

"I did," she said, "but the remote lot and shuttle scared me. I figured my car would be broken into, parked in downtown Atlanta, and I didn't know who else would be on the shuttle."

"If you are worried about the cost of parking," I replied, "there is a MARTA train stop quite close to the courthouse."

"Oh, but MARTA is so dangerous."

You get the idea. This conversation, I think, functions well as an exemplar for the main argument I want to make in this paper: that discourses and anxieties over crime in the contemporary neoliberal city function as ciphers for race and class, with the ultimate result of an atomized and privatized populace. Fears over crime lead us to drive in private automobiles instead of taking the train with other people who may be part of other segments of society; they make us throw away our income on parking due to a conviction crime is devastating our inner cities; and they make us inherently distrustful of our fellow city-dwellers and human beings.[1] Perceptions of crime in the neoliberal city lead to a shrinkage of community and an increase in paranoia, and I hold it is in literary texts where we can see some of these tensions most clearly.

Of course, much of this decrease in public space is systemic in nature – MARTA, for example, is famously limited, and no matter how much many Atlantans want to take it everywhere, the system is poorly designed due to historical and structural racist anxieties and fears, rather than an individual person's bigotry and hatred. This article will look at how individual paranoia intermixes with structural devaluing of community to produce the contemporary neoliberal city, and consider whether there might be solutions to be found in literary texts.

We will begin by looking at Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys,* a novel about Johannesburg which is a city in many ways similar to my own city of Atlanta; move to Ian McEwan's London-set Saturday; and conclude by considering Atlanta, an FX show that aired from 2016-2022. This article will show that, though many neoliberal discourses and histories are actively working against the creation and maintenance of thriving, joyful communities, there are potentials for change.

Johannesburg and *Portrait with Keys*

Ivan Vladislavić's 2007 *Portrait with Keys* is a novel set in Johannesburg, South Africa, and comprised of a series of 138 meditations on life in the 21st century city. The piecemeal novel begins with a short vignette about the consequences of alarming a house:

> When a house has been alarmed, it becomes explosive. It must be armed and disarmed several times a day. When it is armed, by the touching of keys upon a pad, it emits a whine that sends the occupants rushing out, banging the door behind them. There are no leisurely departures: there is no time for second thoughts, for taking a scarf from the hook behind the door, for checking that the answering machine is on, for a final look in the mirror on the way through the hallway. There are no savoured homecomings either: you do not unwind into such a house, kicking off your shoes, breathing the familiar air. Every departure is precipitate, every arrival is a scraping-in.
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> In an alarmed house, you awake in the small hours to find the room unnaturally light. The keys on the touch pad are aglow with a luminous, clinical green, like a night light for a child who's afraid of the dark.[2]

This image of the alarmed house calls to mind the constant anxiety and time-awareness that accompanies those living in urban spaces marked by neoliberal discourses which go hand-in-hand with overblown fears over crime. Crime is presented as something one needs to be ever-vigilant about, and something that you must combat on your own, with an individual solution like an individual alarm system for your individual house. Homes become fortresses, and community disappears as we retreat into our own castles.[3]

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1 It's worth mentioning that this woman was middle-aged and white, and presumably felt comfortable talking to me because I am also middle-aged and white, and at the time was visibly pregnant – she understood me to be an ally, someone she could trust, someone who thought like her about crime and its dangers.

2 Vladislavić 2007, p. 15.

3 The most deadly manifestations of this mindset can be found in so-called "stand your ground laws" in some states in the U.S., which basically grant the owner or inhabitant of a

The choice to begin this collection with this anecdote frames the experience of Johannesburg that Vladislavić wants us to understand – a fragmented, on-edge city full of anxieties over crime and danger. Many of these anxieties are intimately tied to class and of course, race, as when Vladislavić writes in his eighth anecdote:

> The house was put up for sale in 1997. Perhaps the owner was frightened off when the old lady at 17 Blenheim Street was murdered. The murderers, surprised in the act by a neighbour, jumped over the back wall into the yard of the house behind, just a few doors up from No. 22, and escaped into Albemarle Street. After several months on the market and a string of show days, there were still no buyers, and for a time the house stood empty. Finally, it was put up for rent.
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> The first black tenants moved in. It was around then that a sticker bearing the slogan of the anti-crime campaign – I DON'T DO CRIME – appeared on the glass door: either an appeal to the better nature of prospective burglars or an attempt by the new tenants (or their landlord) to reassure the neighbours.[4]

For awhile, the new tenants do not show their faces in the neighborhood, but as they become more comfortable in their home and surrounding urban space, they begin to come outside more. Vladislavić writes:

> Soon there were children pushing toy cars on the path or playing soccer in the street. Tricycles and dolls lay on the lawn. Men lounged about on the steps or worked on cars at the kerbside, and women sat on upturned oildrums, catching the sun on a wintry afternoon.
>
> "What's wrong with these people?" my brother Branko said during one of our walking tours. "Why don't they stay inside like normal people? Why are they always lazing about in the yard? Have they got nothing better to do with their time than sit around in the sun?"[5]

We see here how the threads of fear of crime, atomization, racism, and neoliberalism in the contemporary city combine to make the simple act of existing outdoors somehow deeply suspicious or unpleasant. The Black family feels the need to telegraph their lack of connections to crime, knowing full well such connections have been assumed; however, fear of crime remains so great that this family and other Black families that come after are viewed as odd for going outside. They are not "normal people" – they are still suspect, other, defining themselves against the anxiety and paranoia that marks the white population of the same city. As Patrick Lenta writes, "*Portrait with Keys* bears witness to the unprecedented anxiety which crime generates: a self-sustaining fear on the part of potential victims, as well as an anxiety on the part of those trying to avoid being identified as criminals"[6]. The anxiety of choosing to live like this is constant and overwhelming.

So why is fear of crime at such a hysteria point, such an all-consuming nature in Johannesburg? The answer, as so many answers do, revolves around race and specifically the former South African racial segregation system of apartheid. Lindsay Bremner writes that Johannesburg "has become a field of violent contestation between extreme wealth and extreme poverty, between luxury and subsistence, idyll and inferno, excess and need"[7] and that "into this [neoliberal] situation, a new discourse and set of practices have emerged – those of crime"[8]. In other words, now that apartheid has ended, fears and anxieties of crime have arrived to fill the old system's place and to serve much the same function in a neoliberal city. Of course, the targets of these fears and anxieties are the same as they were in apartheid, with much the same result of racial segregation and increased atomization.

This is not to say, of course that living in a city does not carry danger – of course it does, and of course crime is real and can be harmful. But as Lenta articulates, "Vladislavić himself is clear that crime has socio-economic causes; that it is a pro-

house permission for a blanket use of force, as long as the individual claims "self-defense" – another example of rhetorics over crime making us paranoid and violent.

4 Vladislavić 2007, p. 24.

5 Vladislavić 2007, p. 24.

6 Lenta 2009, p. 125.

7 Bremner 1998, p. 51

8 Bremner 1998, p. 53.

duct of the inequality of South Africa's neo-liberal economy"[9]. Vladislavić cites such figures as "Executive salaries were sixty times higher than shop-floor wages," "40 per cent of black South Africans were unemployed," and "A factory worker earning [...] the average minimum wage [...] would have taken five years to earn what the average company director earned in a month"[10]. With such jarring gaps in resources and employment, it is no wonder that crime is a major issue for the city of Johannesburg. Crime, then, has both neoliberal causes and neoliberal effects – the inequality of the economy leads to (mostly property) crime, which leads to hysteria over crime, which leads to people shutting themselves inside and withdrawing into their private lives entirely, with community life suffering greatly as a result.

As a way of closing this section, I'd like to draw the reader's attention to the amount of vignettes in *Portrait with Keys* that focus very specifically on car crimes – car thefts, car hijackings, etc. As an example, the seventh vignette reads in its entirety as follows:

> When my car, a white Ford Meteor with eighty thousand kilometres on the clock, was stolen from outside my house, I immediately phoned my father. He listened sympathetically. Then he asked: 'Did you ever get yourself a Gorilla?'
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> He had been pestering me for months to buy a steering lock, and I had been putting it off. Now the car was gone. I was on the point of lying: Yes, Dad, I got myself a Gorilla, just as you suggested, but the thieves cut it off with an angle grinder. Went through it like butter. But you cannot deceive my father about such things. 'No,' I said sheepishly. 'I meant to, I really did. But for one reason or another I never got round to it.'
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> 'That's a pity.' There was a long, crackling silence. 'You know, the guys who make the Gorilla are so confident about their product, they offer the purchaser a special guarantee: if your car gets stolen with the Gorilla in place, they'll refund half the excess on your insurance. Ah well, once bitten, twice shy. Perhaps you'll be more careful next time.'[11]

In addition to this example, the 23rd anecdote concerns car hijacking; the 35th, 36th, and 37th fragments are again focused on steering locks; the 52nd on car thefts; the 54th on the financial cost of car thefts; and on and on and on. This is only a short sampling.

Why is *Portrait with Keys* specifically so focused on crime surrounding cars? Cars, and automobility culture in general, are the ultimate expression of neoliberalism. They remove the public from the equation by forcing us off trains and buses and into private vehicles; they cost a great deal of money, for which the owner is individually responsible; and they are an adaptation to a type of city planning that itself developed to atomize human beings, and in the case of Johannesburg (and my own city of Atlanta) to keep different races apart from each other.[12] Cities like Johannesburg and Atlanta are hostile to pedestrians and car-oriented first because of racial segregation systems like apartheid and Jim Crow, but secondly because they are a neoliberal dream. They destroy the town square, civic life, any notion of a thriving demos. The car is the ultimate individualist machine, in that it sections off the wealthy (or comparatively wealthy) from the rest of society, enclosing them in climate-controlled glass and metal, ensuring the car owner's comfort at the expense of the surrounding city, pedestrians, environment, and urban landscape. If we accept that neoliberalism is a form of unfettered predatory capitalism that, by its very nature, atomizes individuals and destroys community by its ruthless insistence on productivity and self-sufficiency, we can see how neoliberalism and a focus on individualism creates a self-reinforcing loop that makes human beings ever-more-distant from each other. It makes perfect sense that of all the fears of crime in Johannesburg, crimes against cars would be featured so front-and-center, which is another thread we see examined in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*.

9 Lenta 2009, p. 127.

10 Vladislavić 2007, p. 73.

11 Vladislavić 2007, pp. 22-23.

12 See, also, my jury colleague's insistence on driving and fear her car would be broken into!

London and *Saturday*

Let's now turn our attention to London, the center of the former British Empire (an empire which, of course, at one time ruled over both the spaces that house the cities we now call Johannesburg and Atlanta). It is virtually impossible to talk about crime in London without discussing Margaret Thatcher, the neoliberal example *par excellence*. In 1978, Margaret Thatcher gave a speech to the Conservative Women's Conference in which she said, "All over the country, and particularly in our large urban areas, people do go in fear and trembling as never before during either the lifetime of their parents and grandparents." Why are these city residents going in "fear and trembling," you might ask? Well, Thatcher continues, due to rising levels of crime. Some people might believe those levels are rising "due to things like higher unemployment, poor housing, poor pay," but Thatcher, and the Conservative Women, know better. "Rising crime," of course, "is not due to 'society,' but to the steady undermining of personal responsibility and self-discipline – all things which are taught within the family."

This remarkable sound bite manages to contain so much within a few short sentences. Cities are places to fear; recent changes (most likely demographic and racial) are making the world less safe; social welfare is to be disregarded in favor of the nuclear family; the important things are within each individual's control. It is this general neoliberalizing and privatizing ethos, combined with the lightly coded fear-mongering about race wrapped up in rhetoric about "large urban areas," that has played such a large role in creating what we will analyze as the contemporary city of London.

Ian McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday* nicely depicts how neoliberalism degrades individual humans as well as communal life and flourishing. Henry Perowne, the protagonist of the novel, is a middle-aged white neurosurgeon, with a loving wife, intelligent and beautiful adult children, and a successful career. He lives in London, runs long-distance races, enjoys cooking, and regularly visits his mother in an elderly care facility. Beyond these biographical details, he is notable for his very lack of intellectual curiosity or connection to the world outside his family; he is, in many ways, the perfect neoliberal subject, focused only on his immediate work and nuclear family, with very little thought given to the politics of the world around him, even though *Saturday* takes place on February 15, 2003, the day of a massive protest against the impending invasion of Iraq.

Though Perowne gives little overt thought to the world outside his immediate familial and professional circle, a scene on home security gives readers an image of how Perowne implicitly views the world around him, its supposed threats and criminal motivations. We learn that Perowne tries his hardest to cut himself off from the city at large, living as he does behind front doors that come equipped with "three stout Banham locks, two black iron bolts as old as the house, two tempered steel security chains, a spyhole with a brass cover, the box of electronics that works the Entryphone system, the red panic button, the alarm pad with its softly gleaming digits"[13]. Lest the reader miss the point, McEwan continues, "Such defences, such mundane embattlement: beware of the city's poor, the drug-addicted, the downright bad"[14]. Such an intense level of security reflects the larger societal anxiety over an increase in crime, and specifically what it has done to Henry Perowne's mindset. He is Margaret Thatcher's aphorism brought to life: "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." Perowne views society as something to wall his family off from, to protect them from at all costs. His home is his fortress, and it is very necessary for him to ward off all crime or even all non-family members. Even though this novel was written before the advent of the Ring camera, this scene calls to attention the paranoid effects of this device – the way discourses around crime and the material practices of neoliberalism work together to create an atomized world where individuals are othered, where people huddle in their homes and their cars without engaging with the broader public. No opportunity for engaging with the broader world is thus possible except through force or violence.

McEwan's depiction of Perowne's locks calls to mind the intense security of the Johannesburg alarmed house articulated by Vladislavić in *Portrait with Keys*. The sense of neoliberal alienation from the city is further underscored by a scene of traffic

13 McEwan 2005, p. 37.

14 McEwan 2005, p. 37.

violence, of a minor driving crime that telescopes out into commentary on larger political and social crimes.

As previously noted, all the action in *Saturday* takes place on the day of a major demonstration against the 2003 impending invasion of Iraq (some sources cite the march as the largest protest in the history of the country). Perowne, driving to a squash game[15], is forced to stop and wait as the protestors pass. When he is allowed to drive again, he gets into a minor car crash with three vaguely threatening men, named Baxter, Nark, and Nigel. (The crash is caused due to Baxter's erratic driving.) Baxter is clearly the ringleader of the small troupe, and Perowne diagnoses Baxter (correctly) with Huntington's Disease after a short interaction. Baxter, distressed at losing face in front of his cronies, leaves the scene of the crime, but the scene has been set for the rest of Perowne's Saturday. Later that night, the three men will break into Perowne's home (bypassing all the layers of security outlined earlier in this section) and hold his family hostage, a small private crime that mirrors the larger public crime of the American and British-led neo-imperial invasion of Iraq.

It is notable that it is a minor traffic collision that sets off the action of the rest of the novel, spurring *Saturday*'s treatment of neoliberalism and its connections to larger geopolitics. A traffic collision caused by aggravated driving is a crime – it is a minor one, but it is still a crime. The car collision scene highlights how atomized neoliberalized individuals are in the contemporary city – everyone exists in their own little steel boxes, much as the woman I met at jury selection in Atlanta demonstrates as well. And when it is this scene, this moving violation, that sets the wheels in motion for the crime of home invasion that in turn is a metaphor for the crime of the invasion of Iraq, it becomes clear that crime in this novel and in the neoliberal city functions as a way to call attention to larger social injustices such as neo-imperial endeavors in Western Asia.

Saturday as a novel is interesting because it is narrated from the perspective of Henry Perowne, who is completely embedded in the neoliberal city and doesn't seem to see anything wrong with it. We are told, on the very first page, that as he wakes up at 3:40 in the morning, he is not disturbed "even by the state of the world." This general indifference to the world around him continues throughout the novel; though he is living through this major anti-war protest, he has no strong feelings one way or the other on the invasion. He does not appear to be interested in, or even aware of, debates surrounding economic and social justice; as we shall see, they simply never seem to occur to him. He seems entirely focused on getting together ingredients for a small family party that evening, as he will be welcoming his daughter for a visit from Paris. Writing about the novel in *The New York Review of Books,* John Banville points out, correctly, that, "owning things is important to Perowne, an unashamed beneficiary of the fruits of capitalism." He notes, moreover, "the politics of the book is banal," that "*Saturday* has the feel of a neoliberal polemic gone badly wrong," concluding, straightforwardly, "*Saturday* is a dismayingly bad book."

Some of what Banville writes is true. Perowne *is* very invested in owning things, and he *is* absolutely a beneficiary of capitalism. But instead of viewing the book as a "neoliberal polemic gone badly wrong," I'd like to instead ask readers to consider the possibility that *Saturday*, through its depictions of crime and neoliberalism, is much more interested in poking holes in the fragmented and atomized urban spaces in which we live. Perowne is not the hero of the novel – he is a tragic character, represented the atomized and individualized lives that neoliberalism wants for all of us. He has nothing but his job and his nuclear family – a pretty poor version of what could be unencumbered human flourishing, living as he does in the middle of one of the greatest cities in the world with almost unlimited resources. Perowne is a man to be pitied, *Saturday* argues, rather than emulated. He is what we see when we do not resist the pull of neoliberalism.

But there are other ways of being in the world, other modes of inhabiting the contemporary city. We now turn our attention back to where we started, to the city of Atlanta, Georgia.

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15 It is worth noting that he drives his car to the gym, rather than walking or taking public transportation; this mode of travel further highlights the privatization of Perowne's life, even in a city as densely walkable and public transport-rich as central London.

Atlanta and *Atlanta*

Atlanta, the FX television show developed by Donald Glover, ran for a total of four seasons between 2016 and 2022. The show stars Glover as Earnest ("Earn") Marks, who is back in his hometown of Atlanta after being kicked out of Princeton University for reasons that are not disclosed until the final season. Earn, living a dispiriting life as a credit card salesman at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport,[16] learns that his cousin, Alfred Miles, is an up-and-coming rapper performing under the name Paper Boi. *Atlanta,* then, circles around Earn's quest to represent Al as his agent as he tries to break into the music industry in Atlanta and beyond.

From the very first episode, it's clear that *Atlanta* is operating in a world circumscribed by neoliberalism. Donald Glover's character is named "Earn," drawing the viewer's attention to the financial hustling necessary to get by in a Southern city lacking social supports such as Atlanta, and "Paper Boi" as an appellation does much the same work. (Paper Boi's first song features the repeated lyric, "All about that paper, boi.") Characters are frequently financially struggling, and hardly any social support system outside the immediate family is ever depicted. This is in keeping with the true urban landscape of Atlanta, which as a city in the Southern United States has had its social services and public life hollowed out, especially in the wake of the civil rights movement. Much like Johannesburg, Atlanta is a city marked by its history of racial divisions, and with the fall of Jim Crow (American apartheid), the city decided to oversee a managed decline in public life so as to reinforce the boundary between white citizens (who mostly left for the suburbs in the 1960s and beyond) and Black residents (who largely stayed in the city).

In 2016, Joseph Hurley noted that Atlanta is "a city that for the last 60 years has supported anti-urban and suburban-influenced development within its previously urbanized areas… These urban residential neighborhoods were consumed by a planning ideology that convinced nearly all segments of American society that car-focused and compartmentalized land use development in both suburban and urban areas were common sense." Irene Holliman Way, similarly, has noted that large architectural projects in Atlanta since the 1970s, particularly those affiliated with architect John Portman, have created sealed-off and antiseptic capsules that "primarily served white collar business suburbanites, well-heeled tourists, and conventioneers – and its insular construction, replete with skywalks between the complex structures, brought little, if any new street life." Both Hurley and Way cite this neoliberal mode of urban development as being tied to desegregation and white anxieties over Black freedom of movement, an anxiety that, as in Johannesburg, is often coded as being over "crime."

We see this neoliberal city, as well as the lightly-concealed white fears, represented well in *Atlanta*. In one of the most famous scenes from the pilot episode ("The Big Bang," aired September 2016), Earn rides a MARTA bus with his sleeping infant daughter on his lap. The choice to put Atlanta's public transportation system front and center in the show, in the very first episode, to normalize riding the bus with a young child, is a direct rejoinder to so many of the comingled fears in Atlanta that circulate around crime and public transportation. These fears have been demonstrated well not just in one-off anecdotes like the one that started this article, but also in newspapers of record. For one example, a *New York Times* article from 1987 by William E. Schmidt notes that "the refusal of the two northern counties [Cobb and Gwinnett] to join the Atlanta system was the direct result of racial fear and animosity," and that "A bumper sticker sometimes seen on Cobb County cars reads: 'Share Atlanta Crime – Support Marta.'" Schmidt also quotes the chairman of MARTA, J. David Chestnut, as saying that "whites in the prosperous suburbs of Cobb and Gwinnett Counties fear that Marta's sleek trains and buses will bring blacks and crime from the inner city into their communities." It is clear, then, that *Atlanta*'s choice to normalize MARTA is a direct pushback against decades of racist and neoliberalizing rhetoric around the supposed linkages between crime and public transportation. At the same time, the show pushes back against Atlanta's reputation as a "Black Mecca," or city of unbridled possibilities for success for African-Americans, by demonstrating the ways neoliberalism circumscribes not only the financial lives of Black Americans, but the social and civic lives as well. As in so many literary texts, this type of hollowing out of the

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16 Access to easy credit itself is a sign of a decaying neoliberal society!

city, of the potentialities for the lives for its citizens, is articulated through depictions of crime and what it means in the neoliberal city.

In many ways, *Atlanta*'s treatment of neoliberalism and crime in urban spaces is linked to *Saturday*'s – there is no firm or direct rejoinder, but rather several off-hand references that ask the reader to probe a bit below the surface of the contemporary neoliberal city in order to think about what a more ideal space might look like. The second season of the show is subtitled "Robbin' Season," and the 11 episodes highlight the various forms of robbery that one encounters in a neoliberal environment, from straightforward robberies of fast-food restaurants to being ripped off by places like restaurants and movie theaters. Various episodes look at what atomized contemporary life takes from people, be it money, time, or dignity, as in Episode 9 ("North of the Border") when the Black characters are forced to sit in front of a Confederate flag and watch a fraternity hazing ritual. Taken as a full series, "Robbin' Season" demonstrates what happens when neoliberal economic and social policies make human flourishing extremely difficult to virtually impossible – crime functions in this context as a way to make ends meet, or to get one over on others before they rob you, or to reclaim some form of dignity that has been lost. As the episode description for episode 2 of the season ("Sportin' Waves") says, "Trappin' ain't easy, ya dig? Shout out to all my credit card scammers in the club tonight." When living conditions have been made impossible, hustling and scamming find fertile ground.

This all, of course, circles back around to the initial premise of the show – Al and Earn trying to make it in the cutthroat music industry. Though *Atlanta* became about much more than two cousins repairing their relationship and rising in the professional world, the hip-hop industry's particular relationship to "the hustle" is a throughline that can be traced through all four season of the show, and through the show's depiction and understanding of the city of Atlanta. Writing about the contemporary rap and hip-hop industry, Lester Spence explains, "Much of rap explicitly exalts the daily rise-and-grind mentality black men with no role in the formal economy need to possess in order to survive and thrive"[17], specifically citing Jay-Z's now-famous exhortation, "I'm not a businessman, I'm a *business,* man!" Spence takes care to point out the deleterious effects of how neoliberalism has thus shaped the contemporary city: "black men… are forced to work incessantly with no way out"[18]. We see the damaging results of this way of life in *Atlanta* (and in Atlanta).

Spence defines neoliberalism "as the general idea that society works best when the people and the institutions within it work or are shaped to work according to market principles"[19] and notes the way that this economic approach has shaped daily life – in its inequities, indignities, and robberies – has been especially hard on African-Americans in the American context, and that overly-entrepreneurial or "hustling" responses to neoliberalism have in turned fractured already-struggling communities even more, made them more individualized and competitive. *Atlanta* is deeply aware of this contradiction, and works to show how, for example, even as Al earns money and rises in the ranks in the hip-hop world, he still cannot get a handle on financial or even physical security – he's stalked by a serial killer even as he's famous and getting rich in the fourth season[20], and is attacked by wild hogs in the second-to-last episode (in an ill-advised sojourn out of the city and to the country, noting that even though the city may be unsafe, there are no real alternatives either). *Atlanta* acutely identifies the dangers of neoliberal society, particularly for Black men, and neoliberalism's various links to crime, from scamming to anxiety over public transportation to actual physical danger.

But *Atlanta* also offers positive visions of the city to grab onto, potential routes out of the neoliberalism that is damaging us all. As Maurice J. Hobson writes, "*Atlanta* builds on a longer tradition of black Atlanta's expressive culture, one that opens the city to social commentary from a new generation of artists who live in the city's underbelly trampled over by Atlanta's pursuit of a global commercial center… It rejects the representation of the city predicated on neoliberalism and demonstrates the fur-

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17 Spence 2015, p. 2.

18 Spence 2015, p. 2.

19 Spence 2015, p. 3.

20 Though Al is in real danger, this storyline is delivered in a typically outrageous and surrealistic fashion – Al is in danger because he recorded a viral "Crank That Soulja Boy" video in 2007, and the "Crank Dat Killer" is on a mission to kill everyone who posted a video.

ther marginalization of the black masses through chic rends such as gentrification." It does this by centering and creating community, by centering the Black community in Atlanta and showing how people like Earn and Al have sought ways out of the neoliberal landscape that is Atlanta and so many cities like it – sometimes successfully, other times not at all successfully. Its surrealistic tone asks the viewer to poke fun at the ridiculousness of the neoliberal city, but its consistent return to Black expressive culture in the face of white anxieties over crime and the neoliberalism that limits routes to human flourishing and connection provide a place for the viewer to imagine what could be as well. The show makes clear that Atlanta as a neoliberal city both currently is the type of place inhabited by overly-anxious individuals, as seen in my anecdote about jury duty, but also that it can be made safer and more collaborative, more conducive to community, if we start to knock the hustle.

Conclusion

Whether we are discussing the stark racial landscapes of Johannesburg and Atlanta or the post-imperial urban space of London (or other neoliberal cities space constraints did not allow this article to explore), it is clear that neoliberalism has severely degraded our cities and our individual lives. Often, this degradation is expressed through cars and traffic violence, from the car theft and locks of *Portrait with Keys* to the car collision acting as a hinge point in *Saturday* to anxieties over imagined linkages between public transportation and crime in Atlanta and *Atlanta*. A future line of inquiry might take up this particular mantle – why, particularly, does neoliberalism's effect on our urban spaces seem so acutely felt via cars and traffic?

Part of this is a relatively easy answer – cars are atomizing, and driving is an individual activity, and it is frustrating and boring and expensive, so it makes sense that a lot of our pent-up anger over unjust economic conditions and diminished social lives would express itself through the activity that so often prevents us from living life in community. Many of the crimes or anxieties over crimes city-dwellers encounter in their daily lives circulate around cars, from traffic violations to aggression towards pedestrians to car thefts and dangerous, out of control speeding and driving conduct. But I think there is more to this, and there are other reasons why cars and crime and neoliberalism show up as a thread to pull in in cities as varied as Vladislavić's Johannesburg, McEwan's London, and Glover's Atlanta.

Neoliberalism has left an open wound on both our communal spaces and on our individual psyches, an open wound that has left us all highly aware of our mortality and vulnerability. Driving is by far the most dangerous activity most people undertake on a daily basis, and most of us – even those who drive as though they are in a reboot of *Mad Max* – are aware of that. Cars and the accompanying individualized culture of automobility highlight for us that we are dispensable in the eyes of the neoliberal city, that public transit systems that would keep us safe have been dismantled and we have been forced to take our own transportation into our own hands in urban landscapes hostile to pedestrians and bicyclists, really anyone without a car. The indignity of traveling in a place like Johannesburg or Atlanta, car-centric sprawling metropolises, leads to various forms of crimes that would be preventable with a more communal approach to society, while at the same time spawning anxieties and tensions over non-existent crime on public transportation. London is also a useful cipher here – though the city is highly walkable, with a comprehensive transit network, neoliberalism has enabled people like Henry Perowne to drive everywhere anyway. People like him can opt out of public life, further disintegrating the social net for others.

I will close here by highlighting one last scene from *Atlanta*. The end of the pilot episode ends with a minor traffic aggression – Earn and Al are at a gas station, and a third man walks by and snaps off Al's car's side mirror with absolutely no explanation. Al gets heated and says, "Hey, man I'm gonna need some cash for this mirror man," and the next thing we know, the two parties are in a shootout. Al and Earn are arrested and taken to jail.

This scene highlights so much – the frustration of car culture, the way neoliberalism has us all constantly on a razor's edge, how crime works as a response to the individualizing and atomizing culture neoliberal cities have created. Al and Earn and the man who instigates the violence by snapping off the car mirror are disadvantaged young Black men, written out of formal markets and indeed broader civil society.

Anger intensifies at being stuck in a car, in turn having that car damaged, and the whole crime story ends with the incarceration of two Black men, a narrative the United States is very familiar with.

So how can we move forward? Embracing society, pushing back against narratives like those promoted by Thatcher and people afraid to take MARTA, would be a good start, though of course we need substantial material investments in public life as well. Funding public transportation, civic spaces, public plazas, and the like are all good starting places to begin to re-create a beloved and public community. But even literary and narrative representation can be a good start to reimagining the world. Urban planner and walkable cities advocate Jeff Speck writes of the television shows he grew up watching in the 1970s, such as *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family*, "They idealized the mid-twentieth-century suburban standard of low-slung houses on leafy lots, surrounded by more of the same. This was normal and good… This is not to say that there were no urban shows on my television set. I saw a good amount of four: *Dragnet, Mannix, The Streets of San Francisco,* and *Hawaii 5-0* – all focused on one subject: crime"[21]. Speck, like so many people imbibing these narratives, naturally grew up as understand crime and urban spaces as inextricably linked.

Speck goes on to point out, however, "Now, contrast my experience growing up in the seventies with that of a child growing up in or around the nineties, watching *Seinfeld, Friends,* and, eventually, *Sex and the City*. In these shows, the big city (in all cases New York) was lovingly portrayed as a largely benevolent and always interesting force, often a character and coconspirator in its own right. The most urban of American cities was the new normal, and certainly good"[22].

This is not to say, of course, that urban-focused sitcoms have solved all of our problems – look at Branko denigrating people for having the tenacity to sit outside, Perowne driving around London, or the ongoing stigmas surrounding public transportation in Atlanta. Yet, I do want to make the argument that literary texts can help us to imagine a new world, less *Dragnet* and *Saturday* and more hopeful, exciting, vibrant, welcoming. It is only by imagining the city as an ideal space that we can eventually make the moves to creating the places we truly want to be.

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