

A Welcoming (and Sometimes Not) America: Immigrant Integration in the New South

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In a departure from traditional patterns of migrant settlement in the US, a cluster of ethnoburbs is emerging in metropolitan Atlanta outside of the central city, changing the region's politics as well as its demography. While Georgia state legislators debate anti-immigrant measures, Asian and Latino households and businesses array themselves in linear fashion along metro Atlanta's ubiquitous highway corridors, and local politics in Atlanta suburbs like Norcross, Doraville and Clarkston increasingly centers on efforts to welcome and integrate immigrant populations.

Figure 1. El Compadre Trucks, Buford Highway, Atlanta



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Georgia has emerged as a major new destination for immigrants (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2002; Zúñiga *et al.* 2002) and Atlanta has demonstrated its willingness as one of the few cities in the South seeking to welcome immigrants.¹ Singer (2015) classified metro Atlanta as a “major-emerging” immigrant gateway, along with such other metro areas as Austin, Charlotte, Las Vegas,

¹ Via Welcoming Atlanta (a member of the Welcoming America network); website: www.welcomingatlanta.com.

Orlando, and Phoenix. While metro Atlanta holds half of Georgia's population, it includes more than 75% of its foreign-born population.

Though Atlanta is Georgia's most vocal "Welcoming City,"² its immigrant communities are new. Only 10% of the metro area's population is foreign born and another 5.5% are children of immigrants. Notably, most of them live outside the central city (US Census Bureau 2015b). Departing from the pattern of traditional receiving areas, a suburban cluster of ethnoburbs is emerging in Atlanta, changing the political dynamics of the region. Growth has been rapid, uneven, and not without tension, bringing a new dimension to old patterns of segregation in the most important metropolitan region in the South.

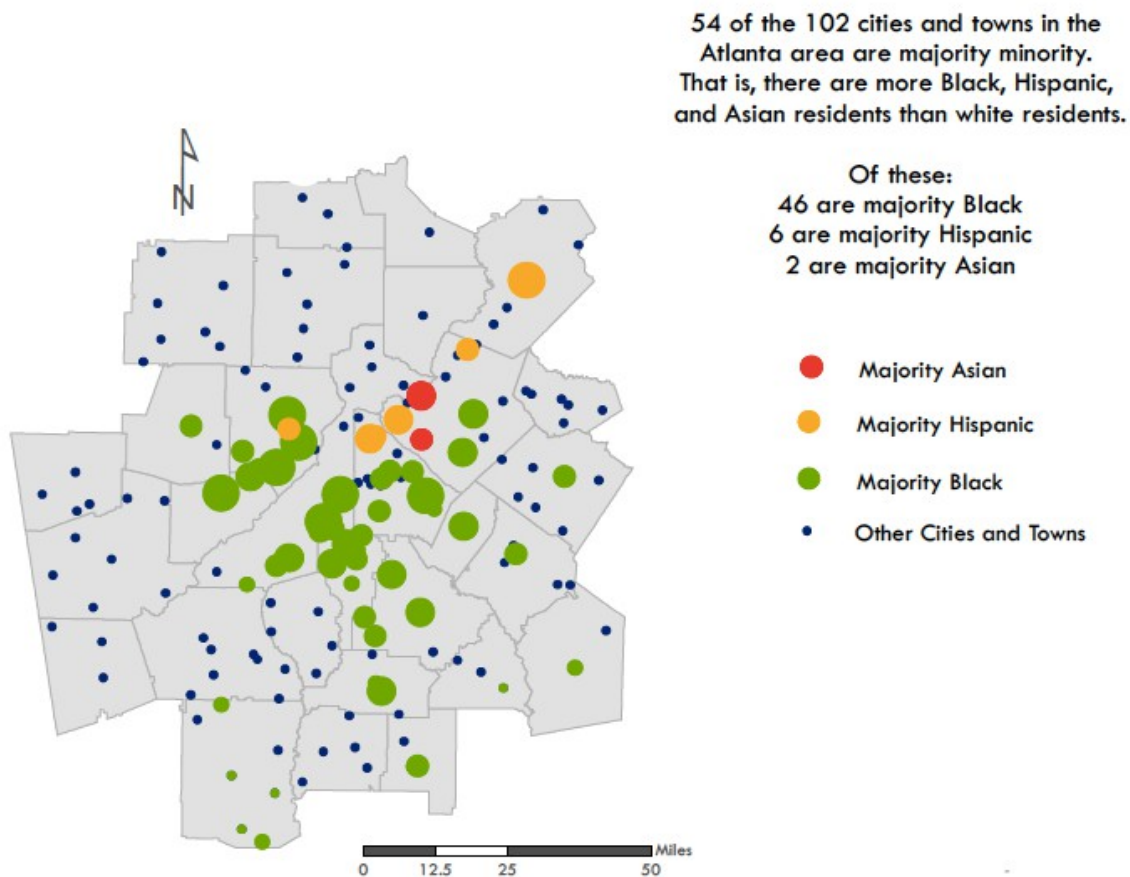
Atlanta envisions itself as a new Global City (Sassen 1991, 2000). Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta Airport is the country's busiest airport and the region has attracted many manufacturers and corporate headquarters. This in turn drew almost 250,000 immigrants from India, China, South Korea, and Mexico, and refugee migration from Bhutan, Myanmar, Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and other countries between 2000 and 2015. While the Atlanta region has also received many domestic migrants in the form of African Americans and non-Hispanic whites from other parts of the US, immigrant minorities have been the primary force driving population growth in Georgia over the last 30 years. Today, 10.6% of the state's 10 million residents are foreign-born (US Census Bureau 2015a). Recently, Gwinnett County joined 78 others in the United States as a "majority-minority" county as a result of international migration (Odem and Lacy 2009).

Suburbanization and sprawl: regional-scale segregation

The spatial form of Atlanta's emerging immigrant gateway metro differs from those of continuing immigrant destinations like Los Angeles, New York (Logan *et al.* 2002), or Chicago, in that the ethnoburb has preceded the more traditional ethnic enclave. However, the immigrant suburbs of Atlanta are formed both by preference (higher-socioeconomic-status immigrants in wealthier northeastern suburbs like Johns Creek) and by barriers to residential choice and movement (the core concentration of Latino, Southeast Asian and other immigrant and refugee groups in places of concentrated poverty in Doraville, Norcross, and Clarkston).

² That is, a member municipality of the Welcoming America network; website: www.welcomingamerica.org.

Figure 2. New immigrant cities of Georgia



Data source: US Census Bureau, *American Community Survey*, 2010–2014 five-year estimates.³
 Foreign-born population in Georgia in 2010: **909,022**
 Foreign-born population in the Atlanta metropolitan statistical area (MSA) in 2010: **689,361**

Buford Highway, for example, once a goods transportation corridor, has transformed into a more than 20-mile stretch of multiethnic businesses, running from the City of Atlanta to the new majority immigrant cities of Georgia. Ethnic entrepreneurs have revitalized Atlanta’s older inner-ring suburbs, helping to create new majority-minority areas that, rather than being nestled inside central cities, are arrayed in linear fashion in a profoundly car-dependent metropolitan area.

Historic patterns of black/white segregation are now being blurred by the arrival of immigrant communities. The historic color line between white and black neighborhoods has expanded, spatially, across the region. Segregation has increased between all groups: low-income African-American residents have concentrated further and further south, in a stream of suburbanizing poverty directed towards Clayton County and the outer edges of the metropolitan statistical area (MSA). Latino-American and Asian-American settlement pushes generally northeast, although there is a cluster of both Mexican and Vietnamese residential populations in Clayton County as well. The spatial formation of immigrant growth in Atlanta is not without conflict: a conflict that seems to result in deeper segregation. Interracial segregation is possibly one of the reasons that segregation and sprawl—at least, suburban sprawl—are intertwined in Atlanta.

Gwinnett County is the current poster child for new levels of Georgian diversity, where “nearly one in four residents is foreign-born ... different from other metro counties because its minority makeup is a more balanced mix of black, Hispanic, and Asian” (Pickel 2008). Gwinnett County’s welcoming of its new immigrants has national significance: it is one of the largest and highest

³ Thank you to graduate research assistant Kim Tatum (Master of City and Regional Planning, School of City and Regional Planning, Georgia Institute of Technology) for her geographic information system (GIS) mapping work.

growth areas in the country that shifted to majority-minority between 2000 and 2013, where the “non-Hispanic white share of population fell below 50%” (DeSilver 2015).

Gwinnett County’s rapid growth has been largely due to new immigrant preferences for the northeasternmost counties of the MSA. It also reflects the ongoing intra-suburban mobility of immigrant populations. For instance, while the city of Atlanta has no Koreatown, an “old” Koreatown can be found right on the inner-ring perimeter of the city, approximately 14 miles from downtown Atlanta.

Figure 3. Asian Square, Buford Highway, “old” Koreatown, Doraville



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The revealing blue-tile roofs, a Korean architectural symbol, mark the spaces of old Koreatown. Many Korean businesses remain in the area, but Asian Square is now predominantly Vietnamese, and Doraville has Bangladeshi and Chinese commercial centers. The crosswalk and pedestrian stop seen above reflect Buford Highway’s emergence as an “ethnic highway.” According to Buford Highway advocate and protectress Marian Liou⁴ (founder of We Love BuHi⁵), local Chinese and Chinese-American residents have a Mandarin saying that “Buford Highway is the Boulevard of One Hundred Fortunes.”

New Koreatown has followed Buford Highway about 12 miles further north into the heart of Gwinnett County, relocating to Duluth (27 miles from downtown Atlanta). This reflects both Korean immigrant residential preferences for higher-performing schools in Gwinnett County and commercial interests’ location choices (Kim 2015). This northeastern trajectory continues to push towards the farthest edges of the metropolitan area, with Korean residents moving to Johns Creek

⁴ See: www.clatl.com/news/article/13085963/marian-liou.

⁵ See: <http://instagram.com/welovebuhj>.

(28 miles from downtown Atlanta), Suwanee (34 miles from downtown), and Cummings (40 miles).

The daily reality of a changing South in these areas is evident, as metropolitan Atlanta is quickly reborn as an immigrant destination. This South attracts immigrants—and local cities have in many ways relied on immigrant residential growth and immigrant entrepreneurship to revitalize suburbs that previous residents had already abandoned for other, better suburbs. Latino and Asian immigrants found homes and opened businesses there. When a major grocery retailer left Jimmy Carter Boulevard, Vietnamese immigrant entrepreneur Ben Vo built Hong Kong Supermarket, in turn stimulating the growth of other mom-and-pop restaurants in the plaza. In both Norcross and in Doraville, pictured below, the reoccupation of retail space is driven by Mexican, Central American, Vietnamese and Korean entrepreneurs.

Figure 4. Plaza Fiesta, Buford Highway, Atlanta



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From enclave to ethnoburb: how does a Southern “immigrant suburb” take root?

Norcross, in Gwinnett County, was one of the first parts of metro Atlanta to gain a substantial immigrant population, and by 2000 was already considered one of the “greatest ethnic-owned business concentration[s] in the southeastern United States” (Walcott 2002). A small town northeast of Atlanta, located where I-85 meets I-285, Norcross hosts one of Georgia’s oldest Latino shopping centers (Plaza Latina), as well as the South Asian commercial center Global Mall. Its Hong Kong Supermarket, one of the largest Vietnamese supermarkets in the South, draws shoppers from across the metro region and from North Carolina (Kim 2015; Kim *et al.* 2015), demonstrating how

immigrant businesses can promote local economic development in Southern cities. Norcross businesses have retail sales of \$70,000 per local resident—more than five times the state average.

The “ethnic economy” of Norcross encompasses more than a third of the town’s businesses and contributed \$897 million in annual sales with 9,512 employees last year (Kim 2015). These businesses are spread evenly across the neighborhoods of the city and include Hispanic, Indian, Chinese, Korean, Middle Eastern, and Vietnamese owners. This contrasts starkly with residential patterns, where the town’s wealthiest tract houses only 12% of its foreign-born residents. The populations of the poorest tracts in Norcross are over 50% foreign-born.

A recent *Boston Globe* article, “Being white, and a minority, in Georgia” (Linskey 2016), focused on white resident dissatisfaction with Latino residential growth in Norcross. The article should be read in tandem with Anjali Enjeti’s “Ghosts of White People Past” (2016), which traces white flight from the Asian ethnoburbs pictured on the map of “new immigrant cities of Georgia” below. Fringe suburbs like Norcross initially boomed as whites fled central cities at mid-century, but were threatened with abandonment in the 1970s. Importantly, towns like Norcross were among the main beneficiaries of early refugee resettlement. Subsequent waves of new immigrant arrivals revitalized them.

According to Annie Linskey of the *Globe*, white people in the South are angry about immigrant arrivals. Yes, Norcross is one of an emergent group of Southern cities with a large and growing majority-minority population that is predominantly immigrant and Latino; and yes, some white people are unhappy about neighborhood change. But the reality is that Norcross is also one of Georgia’s four Welcoming Cities. Mayor Bucky Johnson is vocal about inviting immigrants to the city, and Norcross is the only Welcoming City in Georgia with a Hispanic citizens’ police academy and Latino officers on its police force.

At the same time, segregation translates into uneven income, poverty, educational quality, and property values. Median income is over \$100,000 in the wealthiest and whitest tract in Norcross, but below \$50,000 in both the predominantly Asian and Latino census tracts; similarly, homes are valued at about \$105,000 in the poorer tracts, and upwards of \$250,000 in the wealthiest and whitest tract. The high levels of residential segregation, despite the growing immigrant business community, highlights the need for more integrated social and civic engagement programs such as those encouraged by Welcoming America’s member cities and counties.

Demographic and political questions

The majority of immigrants to the Atlanta MSA are legal residents, but the state legislature also often conflates authorized and unauthorized immigrants. Even then, there is significant evidence that unauthorized immigrants contribute to the state: the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute (Coffey 2006) estimated that there are roughly 250,000 undocumented immigrants in Georgia, who contribute about \$250 million in state tax dollars (other estimates⁶ have put contributions at about \$350 million, with Georgia ranked 10th in the country for taxes received from undocumented immigrants). Latino and Asian undocumented youth in Georgia⁷ have made deep and deliberate connections with African-American civil-rights leaders still based in Atlanta. From this diversity has emerged a new, and young, voice for immigrants—for undocumented immigrant youth who are challenging barriers to public universities (Johnson 2015) in particular. Organizing in the greater Atlanta MSA has created new coalitions between immigrants and African Americans (AAAJ-Atlanta and CPACS 2016). While the state is often preoccupied with legislation⁸ that attempts to contain Latino immigration, or moratoriums seeking to regulate or ban Muslim places of worship (Lutz 2016), Clarkston, the city with the highest proportion of immigrants in Georgia, is almost

⁶ See: www.itep.org/pdf/undocumentedtaxes2015.pdf.

⁷ See, for example: www.freedomuniversitygeorgia.com.

⁸ See: www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/20112012/116631.pdf.

equal parts African immigrant (Somali, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Sudanese) and Southeast Asian refugee (Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian).

The Norcross and Gwinnett County examples show one distinct form of the majority-minority shift taking place in US metropolitan areas: Gwinnett County experienced a greater percentage decline in the Non-Hispanic white share of the population (above 20%) between 2000 and 2010 than any part of California, and is the largest county in the Southern US to experience this kind of immigrant shift. Georgia represents a paradox in which state government has attempted to restrict the mobility, employment, and civic engagement of authorized and unauthorized immigrants, while many suburbs of metro Atlanta continue to transition into newly majority-minority Asian or Latino places. Time will tell whether local integration can lead to regional and state-scale integration (Ramakrishnan and Gulasekaram 2014) and the eventual political incorporation (Gerstle and Mollenkopf 2001) of diverse immigrant groups—a pressing question for the new and changing South.

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Anna Joo Kim conducts research in the rapidly expanding field of planning for diverse communities, with a special focus on economic development and city planning challenges for new immigrant destinations. Refugee and immigrant integration is an especially timely area of study on changing US metropolitan areas, as the White House launched its first national Welcoming Communities campaign, in partnership with Welcoming America in 2015. Dr. Kim is an Assistant Professor of housing and community development at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She works closely with the Welcoming Cities of Atlanta, Norcross, and Clarkston, as well as other immigrant advocacy and service organizations in Los Angeles and Atlanta. She can be reached at anna.kim@gatech.edu.

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