

An Exploration of “Two Countries” in One City

Carly Berlin, 2018

My initial proposal for my summer research hinged on my investigation of the “two countries” notion—as it grew out of the 2016 presidential election—and how it is manifested in two locations in the metro-Atlanta area. The first place I planned to study was Clarkston, a small town in Dekalb County, GA, immediately east of Atlanta, which has seen a significant influx of resettled refugees since the 1980s and is often described as “America’s most diverse square mile.” The second place I sought to examine was Cumming, in Forsyth County, GA, just north of Atlanta, which is the county seat of a county which boasted itself as being entirely white as recently as the late 1980s. By exploring these two places, I hoped to discover the narratives that these communities construct about themselves and how those narratives relate to the written history of these places. I planned to analyze what these findings said about Atlanta, and the American South, in our current political and cultural moment.

Upon further discussion with my faculty mentor, and through my preliminary research, I determined to refocus my project from “two countries” to multiple. I nixed my plans to study Forsyth county—author Patrick Phillips aptly does so in his recent book, *Blood at the Root*—and instead centered my attention on the evocative juxtapositions that exist within the confines of the city which conceives of itself as the capitol of the South.

I spent much of my summer interviewing refugees and community leaders in Clarkston. I gathered contacts by seeking to fill archetypes: new arrivals to Clarkston, long-time residents, those who have moved away and returned, etc. I spoke with individuals from Burma, Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Syria, and many other places, as well as American-born people who serve refugees through resettlement agencies and educational/career-oriented programming. With this material, I am writing a feature story for *The Bitter Southerner*, an-Atlanta based multimedia magazine which is dedicated to showcasing a broad range of Southern stories. My piece focuses on the varying definitions of home in a place where most everyone is fleeing somewhere else. The staff of *The Bitter Southerner*, whom I know well through a previous internship, has provided ample guidance with this project.

When not in Clarkston, I spent the rest of my nine-week fellowship researching, by visiting historical sites, spaces that reveal tension in the politics of memory. Through my reportage in Clarkston, and my close observations in other areas of Atlanta, I plan to embark on a collection of literary essays for my honors project which explores these tensions: Clarkston’s refugee community and its proximity to Stone Mountain, the birthplace of the second Ku Klux Klan; Oakland Cemetery, which houses 3,000 Confederate graves, and the grave of Martin Luther King down the street; the site of the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, a prominent Jew, and the centers of vibrant Jewish life in contemporary Atlanta. I also read literary nonfiction for content—namely, portions of Steve Oney’s *And the Dead Shall Rise* and James Baldwin’s *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*—and for style—Eula Biss’ *Notes from No Mans Land* and John Jeremiah Sullivan’s *Pulphhead*.

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Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship