

University of Virginia

From Scorned to Celebrated:

The Legacy of Atlanta's Civil Rights Leaders in Public Murals

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MDST 4510: Media and the Civil Rights Movement

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December 13, 2024

Today, Atlanta is celebrated as a hub of black culture, business, and leadership, but its status as a symbol of progress and empowerment was hard-won through decades of activism. As a major city in the South, Atlanta served as a battleground for African American activists in the 20th century, who fought to dismantle segregation and secure equal rights for citizens. The Civil Rights Movement is often reduced to a sanitized narrative in schools and mass media, centering on a few heroic figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., while obscuring the broader grassroots efforts and systemic opposition that defined the struggle. The modern Sweet Auburn district in downtown Atlanta offers a stark contrast to this narrative, with its rich landscape of museums, public art, and memorials that celebrate the legacy of the movement. These spaces reflect a community reclaiming pride in its history, yet they also highlight the gap between contemporary admiration and the critical public opinion surrounding the movement at the time. The murals in Sweet Auburn, such as those dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and Ella Baker, are not just celebratory gestures. They serve as vital tools for recontextualizing the Civil Rights Movement in public memory, challenging oversimplified histories and amplifying the voices of leaders who were dismissed in their era. Each mural tells a unique story that underscores the collective efforts behind the movement while inspiring reflection on the continuing fight for justice and equality. These artworks push against historical erasure and foster a deeper appreciation for Atlanta's cultural and racial heritage, even as the neighborhoods they adorn face ongoing challenges of economic and social inequality.

During the 1950s and 60s, a period marked by widespread violence, intimidation, and systemic oppression toward African Americans and civil rights activists, Atlanta played a distinctive role in the broader movement. The city became a hub for influential organizations that shaped the fight for racial equality, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

(SCLC) and the national headquarters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). These organizations, along with the *Atlanta Daily World*, the first African American daily newspaper in the nation, were central to the movement's momentum (Harmon 15). Atlanta's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)—Clark College, Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, Spelman College, Atlanta University, and the Interdenominational Theological Center—also played a pivotal role, fostering political engagement for a new generation of young leaders (Civil).

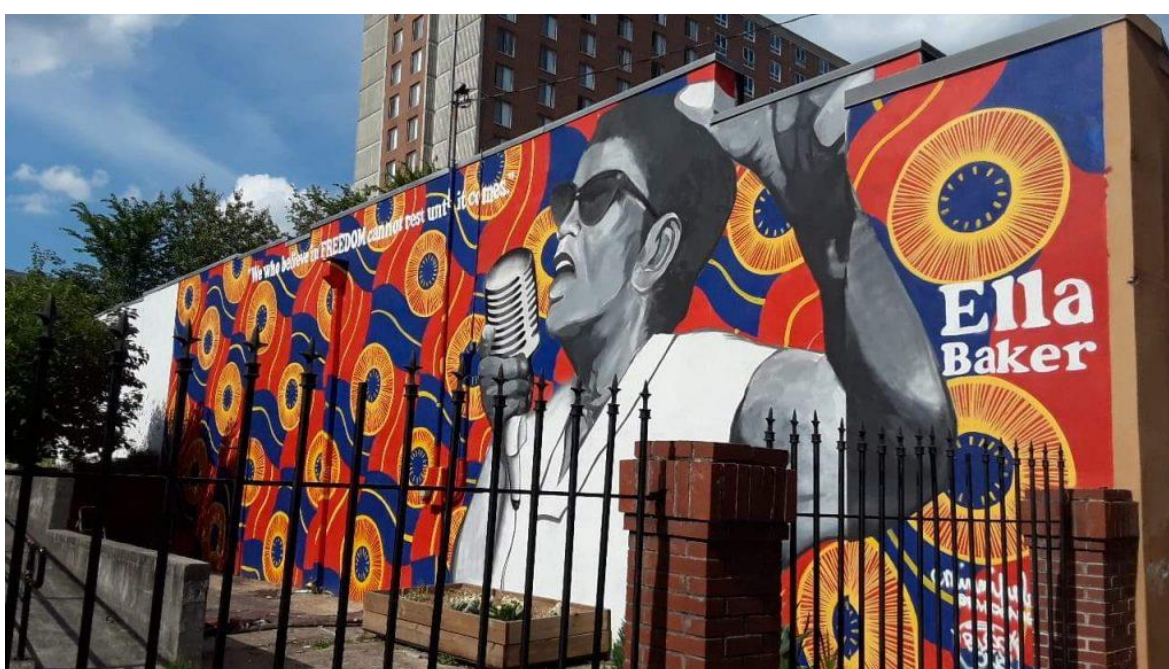
Despite these efforts, Atlanta remained a hostile city for activism. Instead of the brutality and physical violence seen in other southern cities like Selma or Birmingham, white leadership in Atlanta adopted a more passive form of resistance to the movement. King famously identified “the white moderate, who is more devoted to order than to justice,” as one of the greatest obstacles to progress, a sentiment that held true in Atlanta (King). White Atlantans often excused their resistance, claiming they were “too busy to hate,” a phrase that implied neutrality but led to inaction and a refusal to embrace meaningful change (Dwyer 80). This facade of racial tolerance was further undermined by the realities faced by black Atlantans. While the city's white leadership touted Atlanta as a place of progress and racial harmony, the African American community endured stagnant economic opportunities, inadequate housing, and political disenfranchisement. In 1960, the Atlanta Committee on Appeal for Human Rights denounced the discriminatory living conditions in a city that was “supposedly one of the most progressive in the South” (Harmon 165). The civil rights community in Atlanta, largely composed of students, religious leaders, and grassroots organizers, persevered in the face of these unique challenges (Letter). Their collective efforts, though met with resistance and dismissal, played a

transformative role in shaping Atlanta's future and contributed to the broader Civil Rights Movement across the South.

In public memory today, the movement in Atlanta can become oversimplified and misrepresented as the story of a King as a singular hero, uniting a divided city through peaceful persuasion. Schools and the media frequently frame the movement as a distant struggle "where long ago heroes battled distant villains" (Theoharis 6). This framing neglects the complexity of the movement and erases the collective efforts of countless activists who continued the work for decades and into the present day. With African American history underrepresented in modern education and public discourse, the spaces where it does exist become invaluable. Public memory, how a community remembers and interprets its past, relies on intentional efforts to preserve legacies accurately and inclusively.

Memorials, museums, and public art are among the most visible ways communities shape public memory. Specifically, murals have a unique power to influence cultural and historical narratives. They allow members of the public to determine which figures are celebrated, how they are portrayed, and the values they symbolize. In 1974, Maynard Jackson, the first black mayor of Atlanta, created the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, the first institution within city government that was dedicated to the support of arts organizations (Hobson 30). Through city-funded grants, the bureau empowered artists and helped foster black artistic culture. Today in the historic Sweet Auburn district of downtown Atlanta, dozens of public artworks and murals depict Civil Rights Movement figures in diverse styles and scales. These works do more than commemorate individual activists, but they remind audiences of their collective struggle and ongoing relevance. By choosing how these figures are represented, whether as passive symbols or active agents of change, the murals shape the viewer's understanding of their legacy. The

location of these murals on Auburn Avenue, the heart of Black business and social life in Atlanta, adds to their significance. Where a movement is memorialized structures the public commemoration of not just the singular person, but of the entire movement. Sweet Auburn was a hub of opportunity and activism, home to Black-owned businesses, professional offices, churches, and several civil rights organizations. By situating these murals in this historic district, they not only preserve the memory of the movement but also honor the cultural and economic legacy of the community that fueled it.



One mural along Auburn Avenue highlights Ella Baker, an often overlooked but pivotal figure in the Civil Rights Movement. Despite her instrumental role in the growth and success of several civil rights organizations during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Baker's contributions have frequently been overshadowed in traditional narratives of the movement (Boomer). Beginning her career as a field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Atlanta, she spent years traveling throughout the South, recruiting members, raising funds, and spreading awareness about civil rights issues (Boomer). Her dedication to

grassroots organizing defined her career; after co-founding an initiative to support Southern civil rights activism, Baker returned to Atlanta to assist in founding the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) alongside Dr. King (Ella).

Baker's most enduring legacy lies in her commitment to empowering young activists. She believed that youth were the "hope of any movement" and advocated for their self-determination as leaders (Ella). This belief guided her as she organized the students who would eventually form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and served as their advisor. Civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer once described Baker as "the most important black leader in the United States" (Speeches). Baker played a behind the scenes role in numerous historic moments, including the 1964 Democratic National Convention, where she supported the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in challenging the exclusion of Black delegates (Boomer). However, Baker's transformative work and the organizations she helped build often faced criticism and marginalization, particularly in Atlanta. Conservative leaders in the city accused student activism, which Baker actively encouraged, of heightening racial tensions and undermining Atlanta's biracial coalition. Georgia's Attorney General even claimed the NAACP was responsible for disrupting "harmonious" race relations in the city (Cook). Baker's legacy remains underappreciated in Atlanta's public memory, despite modern respect the community now has for the organizations she championed.

The mural of Ella Baker stands as a rare public acknowledgment of her pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement and serves as a corrective to her historical underrepresentation. Located on Auburn Avenue, the mural was completed in May 2019 by local artist and activist Charmaine Minniefield (Janich). She is the founder of The New Freedom Project, a community-based initiative seeking to reclaim lost narratives of African American history and preserve

disappearing Black communities through art. Minniefield's approach to public art emphasizes "place-keeping" by uplifting the histories and stories of where her work resides (New). Unlike many memorials to civil rights figures that cast them in the "cloak of sanctified, non-angry nobility who struggled respectably," Baker's mural defies this trope (Theoharis). It features an image of her taken from the 1964 Democratic National Convention, where she passionately spoke to a crowd to challenge discriminatory policies. Her body language in the mural is dynamic and commanding, portraying her not as a passive figure but as a vocal leader actively shaping the movement.

Minniefield designed the mural to inspire community dialogue about social justice and equity while fostering a new "freedom movement" for today (New). The mural not only honors Baker's contributions but also challenges the erasure of women's leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. Women's roles are often misremembered or overshadowed, and this public depiction of Baker asserts the importance of female activism. By placing Baker prominently on a building, the mural reinforces that her legacy deserves recognition, presenting her as a powerful, active agent in the fight for civil rights. It reclaims Baker's place in history while educating viewers about the vital role of women in movements for justice.



One of Atlanta's most iconic murals honors John Lewis, the civil rights leader and long-serving U.S. Representative for Georgia's 5th congressional district. Lewis's activism began at a young age as a student, guided by his belief in creating "good trouble, necessary trouble" to bring about meaningful change, a philosophy that defined his life's work (Transcript). As a key figure in the movement, Lewis organized nonviolent protests, including bus boycotts and sit-ins, and was one of the original 13 Freedom Riders. These riders challenged segregation policies by traveling on interstate buses from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans, facing brutal violence and arrest (John). In Atlanta, the Freedom Riders' actions were met with disdain rather than solidarity. Letters to *The Atlanta Constitution* condemned their efforts, with one reader referring to them as "these 'things' called 'freedom riders'" and accusing them of perpetrating "wicked and ungodly deeds" (Pulse).

Despite such hostility, Lewis's contributions to the movement were monumental. As one of the "Big Six" leaders, he helped organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where he delivered a powerful speech before Dr. King (John). Although King's speech

dominates public memory of the event, Lewis played an equally critical role in shaping its success. Lewis's influence extended to Atlanta as chairman of SNCC, which he was also a founding member of. He organized and participated in countless demonstrations across the city, often pushing for a more aggressive approach to demand change when local officials and business leaders dismissed their efforts (Harmon 158). Atlantans broadly criticized these protests, with newspaper editorials and business leaders condemning them for the disruptions they caused. Even black-owned *Atlanta Daily World* criticized the sit-ins, arguing that they focused too much on "places to eat" rather than broader political segregation (Harmon 133). The same city that once condemned Lewis's activism eventually embraced him as a beloved political figure. Lewis served as a congressman from 1987 until his death in 2020, earning widespread respect for his moral leadership and dedication to justice (John). However, this political reverence often overshadows the staunch opposition he faced during his activist years. While modern Atlanta celebrates his legacy as a politician, the city's earlier rejection of his work for racial progress reveals a troubling hypocrisy.

The mural honoring Lewis on Auburn Avenue, designed by local artist Sean Schwab as part of The Loss Prevention art collective's "Heroes" series, serves as a powerful corrective to the city's earlier dismissal of his activism (Ruch). Towering roughly six stories tall on the side of a residential building, it is visible from the downtown connector interstate, ensuring its message reaches thousands of commuters daily. Since its creation in 2012, the mural has become one of Atlanta's most recognized works of public art. It depicts Lewis delivering his speech at the March on Washington, with an adjacent lower wall bearing his call to action: "get in and stay in the streets of every city until true freedom comes" (Ruch). The word "hero" is painted alongside the expansive color block figure of Lewis, inviting viewers to reflect on his contributions and

what makes him a hero. The mural's location in the Sweet Auburn district amplifies its significance, as the neighborhood was central to Lewis's work during the Civil Rights Movement and hosted his congressional campaign headquarters. When the mural was conceptualized, Lewis had not yet achieved the "mythic status" he holds in Atlanta's public memory today (Ruch). The initiative was driven by his constituents, who sought to address the lack of formal recognition for Lewis compared to other civil rights leaders like King (Ruch). The creation process was organic and community-focused, reflecting the grassroots spirit Lewis championed throughout his activism. Lewis himself attended the mural's dedication ceremony, adding the final touches to the artwork as a crowd of community members looked on (Burns).

Lewis has applauded the power of public art in social movements, stating that it can "move you to stand up and make you more determined to engage in a struggle to make things better for all humankind" (Ruch). This mural exemplifies that sentiment by depicting Lewis's civil rights activism during a period when he and the organizations he worked with were often belittled by Atlantans. The mural challenges the city to reconcile its past criticisms of Lewis during the Freedom Rides and sit-ins with its current reverence for him as a politician. By commemorating a moment in his life when he was deeply criticized, the mural reframes the public narrative, elevating his activism as not only courageous but heroic. The mural's placement in a public, highly visible space underscores its role in shaping collective memory. Unlike a museum exhibit or formal memorial, the mural demands engagement from people passing by every day. Drivers on the highway are confronted with the towering image of Lewis and the word "hero," forcing a reevaluation of his contributions and the bravery it took to make them. The community-driven nature of the mural adds another layer of meaning, demonstrating that the homage came from the people Lewis served and inspired. In the years since his death in 2020,

the mural has become a site of mourning and respect, with organizations like Sweet Auburn Works committing to its preservation (Ruch). The care and reverence shown toward the mural reflect a growing recognition in public memory not just of Lewis's work as a politician but of his pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy, both nationally and in Atlanta, cannot be overstated. However, the widespread dedication to his memory offers a unique opportunity to consider how his life and work contribute to the larger narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. While King is now celebrated as a revered figure, and he was admired by African Americans and many white moderates during his lifetime, his respectability was often weaponized to maintain oppressive structures. Born and raised in segregated Atlanta, King's early years were shaped by the city's racial inequities, and his experiences there informed his later leadership. After attending Morehouse College, King returned to Atlanta in 1959 to co-pastor Ebenezer Baptist Church and lead the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (About). Despite his peaceful, religious image, his return was met with hostility from figures like Georgia Governor Ernest

Vandiver, who openly accused King of inciting crime and declared he was “not welcome in the state” (Vandiver).

Even as King’s prominence grew, the hypocrisy of Atlanta’s white leadership became evident. When King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, many white business leaders refused to honor him, citing their resentment over continued protests in segregated public spaces. Yet, to maintain Atlanta’s self-proclaimed image as the “most progressive city in the South,” they reluctantly attended a biracial dinner in his honor (Harmon 165). This event showcased Atlanta’s performative progressivism, offering public displays of unity while continuing policies that marginalized the African American community. By 1966, a Gallup poll revealed that 72 percent of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of King, a stark contradiction to the “beloved” status white moderates often attributed to him (Theoharis 3).

King’s public image as a religious, respectable, and nonviolent leader made him a palatable symbol for white moderates, then and now. However, this oversimplified narrative reduces the Civil Rights Movement to a singular figure while erasing the contributions of countless other activists who faced hostility. His efforts were part of a collective struggle, propelled by the work of grassroots organizers, youth leaders, and communities who fought tirelessly against segregation and economic disparities. White moderates often celebrated King’s peaceful methods while dismissing or condemning more confrontational activism, further perpetuating a selective memory of the movement. When King was assassinated in Memphis in 1968, the nation mourned, but a national poll showed less than one-third of respondents believed his death would significantly impact white racial attitudes (Harmon 218). Although his legacy as a preacher of nonviolence and justice endures, the systemic struggles he fought against persist to this day, such as economic inequality, political disenfranchisement, and racial injustice. While

the respect given to King is well-deserved, it is crucial that his commemoration does not overshadow the broader movement or erase the efforts of the many other leaders continuing into today.

Today, much of the Sweet Auburn district is dedicated to honoring King's legacy, including the King Center and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park, both located on Auburn Avenue near his former church, Ebenezer Baptist. While the area is rich with public art tributes to King created by individual artists, one mural stands out for its broader narrative focus. Situated at the King National Park Visitor Center, this mural offers a sweeping tribute not only to King's life but also to the larger Civil Rights Movement. The mural was created in 2010 by Louis Delsarte, a local artist and professor at Morehouse College (Martin). Spanning 25 by 10 feet, the mural serves as what Delsarte describes as a "filmstrip" of King's life, chronicling pivotal moments from his childhood on Auburn Avenue to his vision of the "promised land of equality" referenced in his final speech before his death (Martin). What sets this mural apart is its deliberate inclusion of the countless others who shaped the movement alongside King. Delsarte spent over a year researching key leaders and events, incorporating figures like Ralph David Abernathy, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks, as well as scenes depicting crucial moments such as the Memphis sanitation workers' strike, Bull Connor's attack dogs, and the tragic death of Emmett Till (Delsarte). By showcasing these individuals and events, the mural avoids the common flaw of reducing the Civil Rights Movement to a single heroic figure and instead emphasizes the collective struggle.

The mural's creation was a community effort, commissioned by the City of Atlanta Office of Cultural Affairs' Public Art Program and brought to life with the assistance of nearly 200 local volunteers (Delsarte). These volunteers, many of whom were too young to have

experienced the movement firsthand, expressed a sense of empowerment in contributing to the mural. For them, the process symbolized their active participation in preserving and continuing the movement's legacy (Delsarte). Similar to the creation of the John Lewis mural, the involvement of local community members allows for them to have an active role in the public memory and preservation of the movement's legacy. This collective effort mirrors the movement itself, just as the mural required many hands to execute, the progress of the Civil Rights Movement relied on the contributions of countless individuals beyond King.

While many memorials to King present the movement as a narrative of individual heroism and personal perseverance, this mural rejects that framing. Though dedicated to King, it reorients public memory to acknowledge the thousands who struggled before and alongside him. Positioned at the official historic site for King, the mural's message carries significant weight. It serves as a reminder that while King's contributions were monumental, the Civil Rights Movement's victories were collective, involving the sacrifices and efforts of an entire community. By shifting focus from King alone to the broader movement, the mural challenges viewers to reflect on the enduring need for collaborative action. Unfortunately, though King's memory and name are present throughout Sweet Auburn and downtown Atlanta, its reach doesn't extend far into many parts of Atlanta. The murals, museums, and memorials devoted are largely missing from the higher income, predominantly white neighborhoods. Ironically, the geographical reality of his legacy is "more about boundaries than bridges", fixed at a scale that reinforces contemporary racial divisions and inequalities (Dwyer 80).

Each of these three murals plays a distinct yet interconnected role in reframing the history of the Civil Rights Movement, pushing back against the oversimplified narrative that the movement was solely the work of King. Scholar Jeanne Theoharis argued that popular

understandings of the Civil Rights Movement often erase the broader grassroots struggle and downplay the systemic resistance its members faced (Theoharis 19). She calls for a more accurate and nuanced history, one that these murals exemplify through their imagery, placement, and message. By honoring individual leaders like Ella Baker and John Lewis while situating them within the broader collective effort, these murals provide a corrective to history that recognizes both their personal courage and the community organizing that propelled the movement forward.

Public art is particularly powerful in reshaping historical narratives because it occupies everyday spaces, forcing engagement from passersby who might otherwise avoid or overlook this history. Unlike museums or formal memorial sites, which require deliberate visits, murals demand attention by inserting themselves into the landscape of the city. In Atlanta, a city central to the Civil Rights Movement, these murals are declarations that Black history is American history. Their visibility on prominent streets and buildings challenges the segregation of public memory, asserting that the contributions of Black leaders are integral to the nation's identity. The presence of these murals also forces a reckoning with the city's past. Lewis, Baker, and King faced criticism, hostility, and systemic oppression during their lifetimes, often from the very communities and institutions that now celebrate them. By elevating these figures onto the sides of buildings, these murals confront the hypocrisy of a city that once sought to silence them. They demand accountability, serving as visible reminders of the work that was done and the sacrifices that were made, while insisting that this history remains part of the present. Additionally, these murals were initiated by members of the community and African Americans who valued the transformative power of public art, and not potential undue praise for the city's historical response.

While murals may focus on individuals, the sheer number of them throughout the Sweet Auburn district emphasize the collective nature of the movement. The murals work in tandem to disprove the myth that progress was achieved by a few iconic figures alone. Instead, they highlight the interconnected efforts of countless leaders and activists, many of whom remain lesser known. Theoharis warns that certain types of memorials risk isolating leaders from the larger movement, presenting them as respectable and detached from the radicalism that defined their work (Theoharis 17). These murals, however, do the opposite. By depicting them in active and passionate poses, addressing crowds with resolve, they reject the sanitized narrative of passive respectability. Their depicted fierceness stands in stark contrast to the diluted memory of the movement often perpetuated in mainstream narratives, reminding viewers that progress was not inevitable but fought for with deliberate, courageous action.

One of the organizers for Lewis's mural reflected that during her time as a student in Atlanta in the 1990s, she was struck by the lack of visual representation celebrating Sweet Auburn, despite its significance as one of the most vibrant and historically important districts in the city (Ruch). The creation of murals like those honoring Lewis, Baker, and King over the past 15 years has been instrumental in shifting public perception about the district's value, both as a cultural landmark and as a site of ongoing historical significance. These murals not only preserve the achievements of past leaders in modern memory but also serve as inspiration for future generations, encouraging them to see themselves as agents of progressive change. The artists and organizers behind these works intentionally designed them to connect the past to the present, emphasizing the relevance of historical struggles to contemporary issues. They remind local communities, particularly younger generations, that the fight for equality is not limited to the past but a living movement requiring continued engagement.

Additionally, the murals draw attention to Sweet Auburn in ways that transcend the immediate neighborhood. The Lewis mural, for example, captures the gaze of highway drivers who might otherwise bypass the district entirely. Its bold depiction of Lewis, paired with the word "hero," forces viewers to reflect on the leader's impact and engage with the broader history of the area. This visibility not only amplifies the significance of individual figures but also elevates Sweet Auburn as a cornerstone of Atlanta's cultural and civil rights legacy. The murals' presence challenges the city's tendency to overlook or undervalue historically Black neighborhoods, pulling attention toward the district's contributions to American history and culture. They demand people see and acknowledge both the legacy of the movement and the neighborhood that nurtured it. They transform Sweet Auburn from a space people might ignore into one they actively seek out, fostering community pride and encouraging critical dialogue about the work still left to do.

While these murals serve as powerful backdrops for ongoing conversations around civil and human rights, they cannot resolve every racial and economic inequality facing Atlanta today. Tremendous progress has been made by activists over the last century, but the city's minority communities still grapple with systemic challenges, particularly in the realms of economic opportunity and housing. Atlanta ranks as the number one city in America for income inequality, with stark racial disparities underscoring this divide (Wiltz). While only two percent of white Atlantans live below the poverty line, many Black Atlantans face economic hardships, often confined to under-resourced neighborhoods that contrast sharply with wealthier suburban developments (Wiltz).

These murals, however, stand as vital symbols for communities bearing the weight of these inequalities. They do not alleviate the tangible burdens of poverty, housing insecurity, or

systemic bias, but they offer a source of inspiration and solidarity. By highlighting the courage and resilience of figures like John Lewis, Ella Baker, and Martin Luther King Jr., the murals remind Atlantans of the enduring power of grassroots activism and the progress that collective struggle can achieve. They counteract the sanitized retellings of the Civil Rights Movement that isolate today's social justice efforts from the work of past freedom fighters. These murals ensure that residents, particularly in historically significant neighborhoods like Sweet Auburn, see daily reminders of what can be accomplished through collaboration and persistence. Ultimately, the murals collectively reshape public memory, challenging the dominant narratives that reduce the Civil Rights Movement to the achievements of a few iconic figures. The John Lewis mural demands a reevaluation of his legacy, emphasizing his work as a young activist when his actions were criticized even by his own community. The Ella Baker mural highlights the power of grassroots organizing and the critical role women played in building the movement. The Martin Luther King Jr. mural re-centers the collective effort behind the movement, ensuring that the thousands of unsung heroes who stood alongside King are not forgotten.

Together, these works assert that the Civil Rights Movement was not an isolated or polite endeavor; it was a radical push against systemic oppression, fought by countless individuals in the face of significant resistance. By occupying prominent spaces in the city, these murals refuse to let Atlanta, or the nation, look away from this legacy. They demand that the progress is continued, confronting the hypocrisy of a city that prides itself on its progressive history while many of its residents remain marginalized. In doing so, the murals challenge Atlanta to honor its past by addressing the inequalities of the present, proving that the fight for justice and equality is far from over.

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