

– RESCALING ABSENTEEISM: Mapping the Multi-scalar and Relational Geographies of Absentee Housing Ownership in Atlanta

TAYLOR SHELTON AND RYAN PARDUE

Abstract

Absentee housing ownership is a crucial but underappreciated element of contemporary inequality. Most often, absenteeism is treated as a secondary or subsidiary process to other manifestations of housing injustice, and even where it is examined, it is usually conceptualized as a binary. However, like essentially all geographical processes, absenteeism is best conceived of in more relational and flexible terms that take account of the variety of forms in which it might manifest, including absentee ownership within the same city or metro area. This article seeks to promote such a perspective by developing a framework for the multi-scalar and relational analysis of the geographies of absentee housing ownership. Using a case study of Atlanta, Georgia, our empirical analysis demonstrates that the geographies of absentee ownership tend to follow a bifurcated pattern, where predominantly poorer and Blacker neighborhoods are more likely to be owned by absentee owners nearer by. However, high levels of absentee ownership, albeit of a very different character, are also present in wealthier and whiter communities, with more of the properties in these areas being owned at much greater distances. Ultimately, this article argues for greater attention to absentee housing ownership across a range of contexts in order to understand its multiple geographic manifestations.

Introduction

Since the emergence of private property, ownership of land—and, by extension, housing—has been unequal and concentrated largely among the powerful, whether they be feudal lords or capitalists. With the spread of European colonialism across the globe, the geographies of ownership were reshaped, with ownership being divorced from residence and occurring at greater distances than had previously been seen. In the centuries since, absentee property ownership has persisted even as Western society has urbanized and industrialized, although the geographies of absentee property ownership have also transformed, especially in the increasing globalization of property ownership (Fernandez *et al.*, 2016; Rogers and Koh, 2017; Atkinson, 2019; McKenzie and Atkinson, 2020).

However, the recent growth of cross-national property ownership and the attention paid to it has ultimately masked the multiple varieties of absentee ownership that continue to exist within and between cities, which don't necessarily have to involve ownership tied to a separate county or state to be meaningful. This reflects the fact that absentee ownership is often considered in binary terms; you're either on one side of the imaginary dividing line or the other, you're an absentee owner or you're not. But like essentially all geographical processes, absenteeism is best conceived of relationally rather than in absolute terms. We therefore need to understand absenteeism in more flexible terms that account for the variety of forms that a given social and spatial dynamic, such as absentee property ownership, can take.

In the interest of promoting exactly such a perspective, this article seeks to develop a multi-scalar analysis of the geographies of absentee housing ownership using a case study of Atlanta, Georgia. For the purposes of this article, we define absentee ownership

This research was supported by a Georgia State University Scholarly Support Grant for the 2022/23 academic year.

as a situation where a property's owner is not geographically proximate to the property in question. However, we intentionally leave the precise definition of proximity somewhat vague, since the threshold for absenteeism ought to be conditional on the property, the specific social, economic and cultural conditions surrounding the owner relationship, and the motivations of the researcher investigating it. In short, absenteeism exists simultaneously at multiple overlapping scales that are worthy of attention, although existing analyses of distanciated property ownership rarely take them into account.

One of the goals of this article is to analyze absentee ownership on its own terms, rather than as a tangential or subsidiary process to other forms of 'irregular' housing ownership. Because absentee ownership is often only discussed in relation to other processes, such as vacancy and abandonment, there is a tendency to collapse together what are essentially distinct, albeit sometimes overlapping, processes. Not only do absentee-owned properties not necessarily lead to vacancy and abandonment, but neither are all absentee owners landlords actively extracting rents from their property—consider the cases of properties owned as second homes (Stiman, 2020; Wegmann, 2020; Shelton, 2021) or for future residence (Ward and Carew, 2000). Nevertheless, regardless of whether absentee-owned properties are being productively used in some way, part or all of the time, they are still essentially being treated as speculative assets, with their exchange value elevated over their use value. Their value and the wealth they generate are extracted and transferred from in situ tenant to absentee owner, or from the more-or-less permanent extant community to the occasional resident. Even though they are not entirely coincident, we see absenteeism as a powerful analytic because it makes clear the essentially extractive dynamic of landlordism writ large: the fact that some people and places benefit at the expense of others through their control over land and housing. Further, absenteeism helps to drive home the more general point that the present nature and function of urban space is primarily as a tool for producing value on behalf of capitalists and rentiers, rather than as a place for people to live and thrive.

In order to examine these processes and elucidate the multi-scalar geographies of absentee housing ownership, the rest of the article is organized as follows. First, we outline the ways that absenteeism has (or has not) been discussed in the extant literature in urban studies and housing, providing additional detail to support our claim above that absenteeism is most often discussed as a subsidiary or related process to other forms of urban inequality, rather than on its own terms. As such, we then turn to the literature on *rural land ownership* as a supplement to our discussion, since absenteeism has been a much more established topic of research within the rural literature. We conclude the literature review by providing an overview of the multiple competing ways in which absenteeism has been operationalized in the literature, making the case for a multi-scalar approach that is both more flexible and more complete in its analysis.

We then transition towards our case study of Atlanta, Georgia, which is illustrative for a number of reasons. Atlanta is the largest metropolitan area in the American South, with a highly segregated central city that was, for roughly 50 years, majority Black, governed by a succession of Black mayors and forming a cultural hub for Black Americans (Hobson, 2017). Despite this, there remain significant inequalities both between, and even within, the city's predominantly Black south and west sides and its predominantly wealthy and white north and east sides (Shelton, 2022b). Recent years have seen the city consistently ranked as having the widest income inequality of any major city in the United States (Stokes, 2018; Jackson, 2022). These broader racial and class inequalities have shaped, and in turn been reinforced by, the city's housing market, with absenteeism being just one manifestation among many.

Atlanta's longer housing history includes being both the first site of federally-funded public housing in the 1930s and the first city to demolish the entirety of its public housing stock. More recently, Atlanta was among the cities and metros most deeply impacted by subprime and predatory mortgage lending and the subsequent wave of

foreclosures, which in turn led to the massive acquisition of these and other properties by institutional investors, such that Atlanta leads all metro areas in both the total number and the market share of these corporate-owned single-family rentals (Immergluck and Law, 2014; GAO, 2024; Seymour *et al.*, 2025). At the same time, historically Black neighborhoods in the urban core have experienced rapid gentrification in recent years (Mitchell *et al.*, 2025), fueled by both the demolition of the city's remaining public housing stock and ever-growing speculative investments around the Atlanta BeltLine (Immergluck, 2022).

Our case study begins by discussing the data and methods used in our analysis of absenteeism in Atlanta, Georgia, providing a general framework for how such multi-scalar analyses of absenteeism could be replicated in other locales. We then present the results of our analysis, which shows a bifurcated pattern of absenteeism across the City of Atlanta where absenteeism is concentrated in multiple different locations across the city that are home to starkly different social dynamics, reflected in the different scales at which absenteeism is manifest in these locations. Ultimately, while our analysis of Atlanta uncovers a pattern that likely exists across other contexts, we make the case that absentee ownership of housing (and land and property more generally) is worthy of more attention and study across a range of contexts in order to understand its multiple geographic manifestations.

The absence of absenteeism from urban housing scholarship

While it lurks beneath the surface of many different instantiations of urban inequality, absentee housing ownership has, in general, been relatively understudied within the scholarly literature. Instead, urban housing research has more closely followed the actions taken by property owners and their impacts on tenants and the surrounding community. Such discrete events, like foreclosures and evictions, have held the attention of urban housing scholars over the last several decades (Crump *et al.*, 2008; Immergluck, 2011; Desmond, 2016; Raymond *et al.*, 2018; Maharawal and McElroy, 2018; Garboden and Rosen, 2019), and for good reason. For instance, foreclosures and evictions have traumatic impacts on the immediate well-being and long-term prospects of the people affected (Saegert *et al.*, 2011; Desmond and Kimbro, 2015; Desmond and Gershenson, 2016; Desmond and Perkins, 2016). A wealth of research has shown that these events are spatially and socially concentrated in the most vulnerable urban communities (Smith and Duda, 2009; Niedt and Martin, 2013; Hall *et al.*, 2015; Shelton, 2018b). However, the underlying spatiality of housing ownership, of which absenteeism is one facet, has been relatively underexplored as a primary object of study. Where absenteeism has emerged, it is as a secondary object of analysis or an implicit dynamic, rather than as the primary process being investigated.

In recent years, one especially prominent example of this has been the growing literature on institutional investors in single-family rental housing (Fields, 2018; Fields and Vergerio, 2022; Charles, 2020; Christophers, 2023; Seymour *et al.*, 2025). Though this work has been primarily focused on the effects of consolidation and concentration for local housing markets, it has also been shaped by an implicit assumption about what it means for Wall Street investors to own such large swaths of the housing market while being socially and spatially distant from the properties in question, essentially treating them only as a financial asset. Similarly, the emergence of professionalized short-term rentals points towards absentee ownership without always naming it explicitly (Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018; Cocola-Gant and Gago, 2021).

Elsewhere, scholars have examined absenteeism somewhat indirectly through work on both property taxation and property maintenance. From work in the 1960s by David and Skurksi (1966) showing that absentee owners tend to pay less in property taxes than either owner-occupants or local landlords, to more recent work by Rose and Harris (2022) demonstrating that absentee landlords are more likely to produce code

violations, the deleterious outcomes of absenteeism are a recurring trend, although this is usually only discovered through attention to these related processes on which absenteeism acts.

One general exception to this trend is the growing body of work that seeks to examine the geographies of ownership by visualizing the relational connections between properties and their owners (Shelton, 2018a; 2021; 2022a; Ferrer, 2022; Hochstenbach, 2024; Preis, 2024; see also Bawa and Callahan, 2021 for a rural perspective). While not all of this work necessarily probes the question of absenteeism, it generally recognizes the significance of absentee ownership by virtue of its emphasis on the fact that properties and their owners are differently situated geographically. This work serves as the primary foundation of this article's methodological and visualization approach, as demonstrated in our analysis below. Another recent exception is work by Petach and Crowther (2024), which demonstrates that increasing shares of absentee housing ownership are correlated with increased rents and rent burdens for tenants, especially in predominantly non-white neighborhoods, although these effects are relatively small. Despite these recent exceptions, absenteeism remains sidelined within studies of urban housing inequality.

– Absenteeism from the city to the countryside

Where absenteeism *has* been taken up much more explicitly, however, has been within the literature on the ownership of *rural land*. Starting with the Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force's ([1983] 2014) groundbreaking participatory action research project—which showed that, of the 13 million acres surveyed, approximately 72% was held by absentee owners, whether individuals or corporations—scholars across a variety of rural contexts in the US (and beyond) have examined the ways in which rural spaces and livelihoods are shaped by absentee landowners, whether in the form of industrial agriculture, extractive industries or tourists and amenity migrants from urban centers (Bain, 1984; Petrelzka, 2014; Fairchild *et al.*, 2022). In the aggregate, such studies have pointed to the fact that absentee ownership results in everything from decreased productivity of cropland and the decline of family farms to reduced spending in the local economy and generally weakened political and social structures (Fisher, 1988). While this largely echoes some of the aforementioned work located in urban centers, the main point differentiating these approaches is that absentee ownership is more frequently identified as a problem in and of itself within the rural literature.

Even as some of the extremes of absentee ownership from the mid-twentieth century seem to have softened in recent years, more recent work by Bailey *et al.* (2021) and Ashwood *et al.* (2022) reinforces the persistence of absentee ownership across rural areas and its importance as a foundational socio-economic dynamic. Analyzing timberland ownership across Alabama, Bailey *et al.* (2021) find that in addition to 59% of all privately owned timberlands in the state being absentee-owned, ownership is also highly concentrated, with 'six corporate owners control[ing] 10 percent of the total (1.9 million acres) and the top 30 owners control[ing] over 20 percent (4 million acres)' (Bailey *et al.*, 2021: 51). Furthermore, while their analysis shows that absentee and concentrated ownership overlap but are not entirely reducible to one another, their combined end result is the reproduction of poverty and economic exploitation in the places where these forms of ownership exist in the largest concentrations, a finding reinforced by Bawa and Callahan (2021).

Similarly, Ashwood *et al.* (2022) trace the ownership of corporate-owned farmland in two Illinois counties to investigate changing ownership and financial dynamics. Their analysis finds significant differences in the financial and organizational complexity of 'out-of-town' LLCs and 'family farm' LLCs, with absentee corporations being more likely to belong to a web of interconnected LLCs using a series of internal and external financial instruments. Of particular note is their methodology, which

helps to untangle the fact that the most basic methods of identifying absenteeism tend to understate its reality because distant owners use LLC shell companies with local addresses to appear more closely connected while actually maintaining control and ownership from afar.

Drawing from Van Sant *et al.* (2023), we can say that while there are, of course, meaningful differences in urban housing and rural land markets, there are also meaningful similarities that allow us to read across the two, with absentee ownership being one of these core commonalities. Regardless of the context, studies that engage with absenteeism—even as a secondary phenomenon shaping or being shaped by other aspects of housing or land markets—almost universally demonstrate the ill effects of absenteeism, whether on the quality and maintenance of rental housing or the agricultural and environmental performance of rural lands. Given this persistent negative influence and the general lack of attention paid specifically to absenteeism, we therefore find this to be fertile ground for more critical investigation, especially in urban centers where absenteeism has been a less featured element of the extant scholarship.

- (Re-)defining absenteeism

There is one major difficulty in comparing the findings of the aforementioned studies, regardless of their urban or rural context: each operationalizes a unique definition of what constitutes absenteeism. This ‘difficulty of defining what an absentee is’ (Malcomson, 1974: 17) remains one of the major impediments to research on absentee ownership in general. While it can make commensurability challenging, the vexing question of how to define absenteeism can also open up new avenues for research, as our analysis below demonstrates.

Most often, absenteeism is defined by relationships that cross jurisdictional borders, with a landlord living outside the city, county or state where they own property and generate income (David and Skurski, 1966; Bailey *et al.*, 2021; Shelton, 2021). We tend to think of this as a problem because greater spatial distances imply greater social distance through a removal from the everyday needs and concerns not just of the property and the tenant who lives there, but also of the larger neighborhood and community in which that property sits. Even so, a number of studies mobilize more micro-scale definitions of absenteeism, such as Rose and Harris’ (2022) definition of any landlord who doesn’t live in the property they are renting, or Chase and Siegel’s (2012) similarly broad definition of any property without a homestead exemption. Others, such as Alsup and Klovski’s (2024) recent nationwide analysis in the US, opt for a multi-pronged definition that combines elements of both approaches. Not only do they identify properties that are owned outside the state the property is within (which accounts for approximately 5% of US housing stock), but they also identify properties owned within a different ZIP code than the property itself (accounting for a substantially larger 19.5% of the housing nationwide).

These multiple definitions of absenteeism suggest an important point: spatial distance and social distance aren’t entirely reducible to one another (see Massey, 1991). One need not live in an entirely different state or country to be divorced from the experiences and interests of the people who live near the land one owns. Indeed, a landlord might live just a few short miles from their property but still exist in a world totally separate from that of their tenants if, for example, the landlord’s home is in an affluent gated community and the property they rent out is a dilapidated complex in the middle of a city’s poorest neighborhood. Therefore, we think of this as a kind of *intra-urban* absenteeism, to highlight the ways that different neighborhoods are linked through these extractive relationships of housing ownership, with poverty and immiseration in some places producing significant affluence and extravagance for others (Shelton, 2018a; Purifoy and Seamster, 2021).

Acknowledging nested definitions of absenteeism creates a need to analyze multiple scales simultaneously because they represent overlapping forms of the same essential dynamic. While we want to draw attention to the fact that the same fundamental social processes can exist *within* jurisdictional boundaries just as much as across them, it is still important to recognize the different degrees of intensity that can exist under the umbrella of absenteeism. In effect, there is very good reason why the increasing globalization or internationalization of property ownership has drawn scrutiny: it highlights the extremes that this kind of social and spatial removal can take in our present conjuncture, even if those extremes aren't at all typical of the process of absentee ownership writ large. We can only know the true nature and scale of absenteeism in a given neighborhood or city by looking at how the varying scales of absenteeism compare to each other. The remainder of this article demonstrates the potential insights to be gained from analyzing absenteeism in a nested taxonomy of scales.

Data and methodology

In order to examine the multi-scalar geographies of absenteeism in Atlanta, we begin from a collated dataset of county tax parcels for the five core counties of metro Atlanta: Fulton, DeKalb, Cobb, Gwinnett and Clayton. Each of the five parcel datasets included the street address of the parcel, the name and address of the parcel's owner, and the appraised value of the parcel. Assembled as part of a larger research project entitled 'Who Owns Atlanta?', the parcels for these five counties were cleaned and combined to create a single standardized dataset to allow for cross-county analysis. While the analysis presented below is ultimately only for the City of Atlanta—a relatively small subset of the overall metro area in both size and population that includes large parts of Fulton County and a small part of DeKalb County—the data used in this analysis was organized across all five core counties. As such, the following analysis of absenteeism could effectively scale to larger datasets representing entire metro areas or regions.

— Disambiguating ownership

Having a single standardized file of properties and who owns them is insufficient, however, for actually analyzing the underlying geographies of absenteeism. As Ashwood *et al.*'s (2022) analysis has shown, failing to connect listed owner addresses in parcel records to the ultimate location of a corporation's headquarters can result in considerable underestimation of absenteeism. Connecting parcels to their true owners requires a dual process of disambiguating common ownership across multiple corporate entities and identifying primary addresses for absentee entities that utilize secondary local addresses.

Following the method laid out by An *et al.* (2024), we utilized Google's OpenRefine to further clean our dataset, parsing the text of the owner name and address to cluster together owners that are functionally the same but seemingly distinct thanks to the use of LLCs (Shelton and Seymour, 2024; Hangen and O'Brien, 2025). However, we then went one step further by manually checking the results of this process and further clustering together properties with shared ownership where, for instance, the automated clustering algorithms had left LLC names associated with two different addresses as distinct clusters rather than grouping them under the larger corporate umbrella within which they actually operate. For instance, Invitation Homes, one of the largest owners of single-family rental homes around Atlanta, owned property under 19 corporate aliases, which OpenRefine grouped into eight clusters; manually checking the records of those eight revealed them all to be aliases of Invitation Homes. This method also has the benefit of creating a single proper owner address for each ownership cluster so that properties owned by the same entity are not assigned to multiple different locations, thus erroneously contributing to one or another category of absenteeism.

- **Classifying absenteeism**

After consolidating properties into these shared ownership clusters with cleaned owner names and addresses, we then geocoded owner addresses for all properties to construct our multi-scalar definition of absentee ownership. To do this, we coded each non-owner-occupied parcel (identified as properties with different site and owner addresses) within the City of Atlanta based on the spatial relationship between the two addresses, assigning it a categorical level of absenteeism. These classifications are summarized in Table 1.

We started by classifying non-owner-occupied residential parcels owned within the same neighborhood as ‘non-absentee’, and largely excluded them from the rest of our analysis.¹ Next comes the first level of absenteeism, with properties owned outside the same neighborhood but still within the Atlanta city limits, followed by properties owned outside the City of Atlanta but within the same county, then properties owned outside the home county but still within the five-county core metro area from which we collated our initial parcel dataset. This level is followed by properties owned outside this five-county metro but still within the state of Georgia, followed by properties owned outside Georgia but still within the US Census Southern region, which covers the Southeast stretching from Texas to Delaware. Our penultimate category of absenteeism refers to properties owned outside the South but still within the United States, and then finally properties owned outside the US altogether. We intentionally created a level of absenteeism for every administrative geography (e.g. city, county, state and region) and for each local, colloquial geography (e.g. neighborhood and metro areas) in order to create a high-resolution exploration of how the spatial patterns of absenteeism change depending on the scale of its definition. The use of geographic boundaries to define our levels of absenteeism is intended to mirror everyday categorizations of space, rather than asserting that the inside/outside of these boundaries meaningfully determines the relation between a property and its owner. As previously noted, the socio-spatial distance between property and owner is the defining characteristic of their relation, with our categories of absenteeism representing a rough proxy for these relationships and their intensity.

TABLE 1 Descriptions and property counts for each absentee category

	Description	Count	Share	Cumulative Count	Cumulative Share
Outside Neighborhood	Ownership outside the official neighborhood but still within the City of Atlanta	12,899	29.66%	12,899	29.66%
Outside City	Ownership outside the city but within the same county (Atlanta city limits extend into two counties)	5,435	12.5%	18,334	42.16%
Outside County	Ownership outside the county but within the five-county core metro area	12,985	29.85%	31,319	72.01%
Outside Metro	Ownership outside the five-county metro but within the state of Georgia	2,257	5.19%	33,576	77.2%
Outside State	Ownership outside the state of Georgia but within the US Census Southeast region	4,697	10.8%	38,273	88%
Outside Region	Ownership outside the Southeast but still in the United States	4,859	11.17%	43,132	99.17%
Outside Country	Ownership outside the United States	363	0.83%	43,495	100%

¹ Similarly, we excluded a total of 297 different residential parcels owned by government entities from our analysis, due to their more complex nature with respect to the geography of ownership.

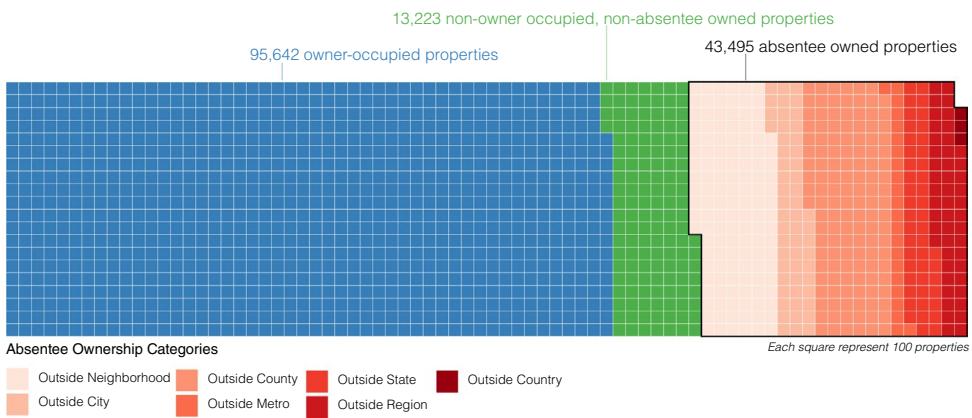


FIGURE 1 Categorizing residential property ownership in Atlanta

In constructing these seven categories, we again recognized that looking only at properties owned outside the city or the state doesn't really capture the underlying social dynamics of absenteeism or the variety of scales at which absenteeism operates. Our multi-tiered scale allows for a more capacious and flexible definition of absentee ownership, and resulted in a dataset of 43,495 absentee-owned residential properties across the City of Atlanta that served as the foundation for the rest of our analysis presented below. Figure 1 highlights the proportion of this dataset constituted by each of our different categories of absenteeism, as well as how absenteeism writ large compares to non-absentee-owned and owner-occupied residential properties within the City of Atlanta.

Absentee-owned properties represent a significant minority of all residential parcels across the city, but in their more expansive definition they also represent a significant majority of all non-owner-occupied properties. Further, these proportions highlight that of those properties we classify as absentee-owned, 72% are still owned *within* the Atlanta metro area, likely the very kinds of properties that would usually be excluded from an analysis of absenteeism based only on the strictest definitions. However, these gradations of absenteeism help to highlight the *internal* differentiation and social distanciation that happens even within what are generally seen as more-or-less 'coherent' socio-economic regions.

– Possible limitations

Due to inconsistencies between different counties' parcel data, we do not have reliable counts of the number of living units within each residential property. While Fulton County provides counts for some parcels, there are internal inconsistencies and sparse coverage that make us wary of using them. Combined with the fact that DeKalb County does not provide unit counts for any properties, we have opted to focus our analysis only on the number of parcels rather than the number of housing units. Practically, this decision means that single-family homes and large apartment buildings are equally weighted in this analysis, and the extent of absenteeism revealed in the analysis should be understood in terms of the amount of property and land owned by absentee owners, not the number of people affected by absenteeism. Therefore, in the context of Figure 1 above there is a reasonable chance that the scale of absenteeism, and its impacts on the rental housing market, may be considerably greater than we are able to accurately capture because of these data availability issues.

Furthermore, the ownership disambiguation process is imperfect and doesn't necessarily link us back to the residences of the ultimate beneficial owners of a property

in cases where the property is owned by a corporation of some kind. This presents a methodological limitation, and a constraint on our understanding of who benefits from absenteeism. First, the ownership disambiguation process works best for grouping together the largest owners in the dataset. This is because owners with a large number of similar corporate aliases are easily identified by the machine learning algorithms in OpenRefine, and our manual clustering was limited to owners and entities with publicly available information. The second limitation of disambiguation comes from the fact that when the identified owner is a complex corporate entity, such as Invitation Homes, the identities of the individual owners and investors who benefit from absenteeism remain opaque and essentially unknowable (Shelton, 2024). Nonetheless, tracing these properties back to their corporate headquarters provides a rough proxy for the socio-spatial distanciation that is at the core of our analysis of absenteeism.

Mapping absenteeism across Atlanta

Mapping the concentration of these absentee-owned properties across the city provides us with an opportunity to unpack the potential drivers or results of this process, as well as demonstrate the nuanced patterns revealed by our multi-scalar analysis. The first step in this mapping process was focused on showing both the total number and the relative share of absentee-owned properties across the City of Atlanta, as shown in Figure 2.

Three key areas in Figure 2 are worth commenting upon. The largest hexagonal symbols represent the highest total numbers of absentee-owned housing and are located in the Midtown neighborhood, although these absentee-owned properties represent a smaller share of all properties here due to the large numbers of total residential units in the area, which is the densest part of the city and characterized by numerous luxury high-rises. Meanwhile, the largest shares of absentee-owned properties are concentrated in the city's predominantly Black westside neighborhoods, with an extensive cluster of areas where absentee-owned properties make up more than 50% of all residential properties. Finally, a small cluster in Buckhead, in the northern portion of the city, shows both relatively high total counts of absentee-owned properties and high shares of absentee ownership as a proportion of all properties. While Buckhead is the city's whitest and most affluent area with a largely suburban built environment, these high concentrations are in the Buckhead Village neighborhood that is home to luxury residential towers similar to those in Midtown just a few miles south.

Together, these three relative outliers in terms of high values of one or the other metric simultaneously confirm *and* trouble our received notions about absentee ownership as a process of wealth extraction. Unlike the aforementioned work by Bailey *et al.* (2021) and Bawa and Callahan (2021), our analysis shows that concentrations of absentee-owned properties in the urban context *are not* entirely synonymous with concentrations of poverty. Instead, in Atlanta, affluent white neighborhoods like Midtown and Buckhead are among the largest such concentrations precisely *because of* their affluence and luxury residential characteristics.

However, these apparent contradictions in Atlanta's geographies of absenteeism can be unpacked through our multi-scalar analysis. As Figure 3 shows, different scales of absenteeism have different intra-urban geographies. More distanciated forms of absenteeism—meaning ownership in the furthest-flung corners of the country or even beyond national borders—tend to be clustered in wealthier areas such as Midtown and Buckhead, suggesting the inter-urban flow of wealthy people and their assets into these areas. At the same time, our category of absenteeism-within-the-same-city is much more concentrated in poorer, Blacker neighborhoods like those on the westside. This dichotomy illustrates the importance of our call to reconsider the scalar definitions of absenteeism. If we were to focus only on a definition of absenteeism where ownership crosses state or national borders, we would be massively understating the essential

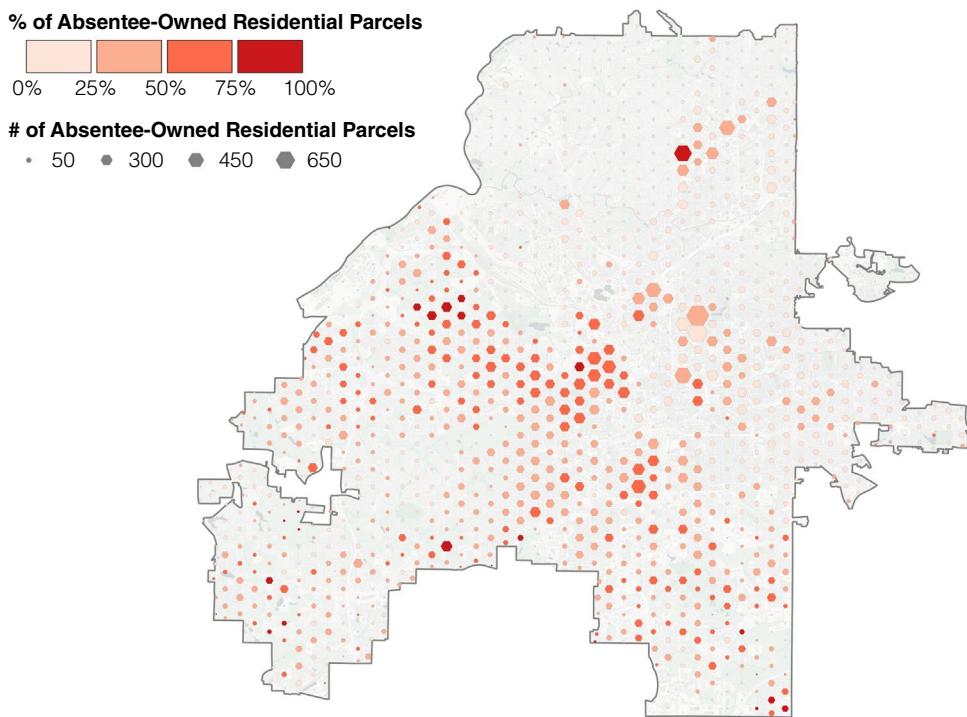


FIGURE 2 Map of total number and share of absentee-owned residential properties in Atlanta. Hexagon size is proportional to the total number of absentee-owned residential parcels within that area, while shading is based on the share of residential parcels that are absentee-owned

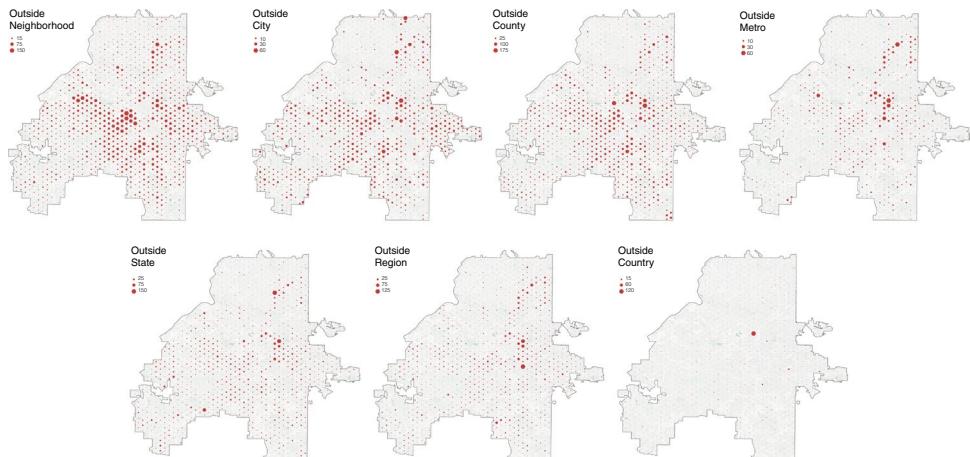


FIGURE 3 Maps showing spatial concentrations of different scales of absenteeism across Atlanta. Note that the size of symbols represents different values for each sub-figure, relative to the total number of properties associated with each category

dynamic that absenteeism as a concept is meant to demonstrate: the flow of rents from a place of one character to a place with a distinctly different character, with very little interaction between the two otherwise.

Even though consideration of these intra-urban forms of absentee ownership is a necessary corrective to their usual exclusion, more distanciated absenteeism remains a significant dynamic. Similarly, we want to shift from simply rescaling absenteeism to understanding its relational geographies. Figure 4 maps these dynamics by connecting the location of these properties within Atlanta to their owners outside the metro area, essentially stylizing the flows of wealth and value out of the city. Table 2 clarifies these relationships, ranking metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) by the total number of Atlanta properties owned within their borders. New York City, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles top the list and have obvious connections to Atlanta through the city's growing finance, federal administration and film industries. The remaining top 10 MSAs include

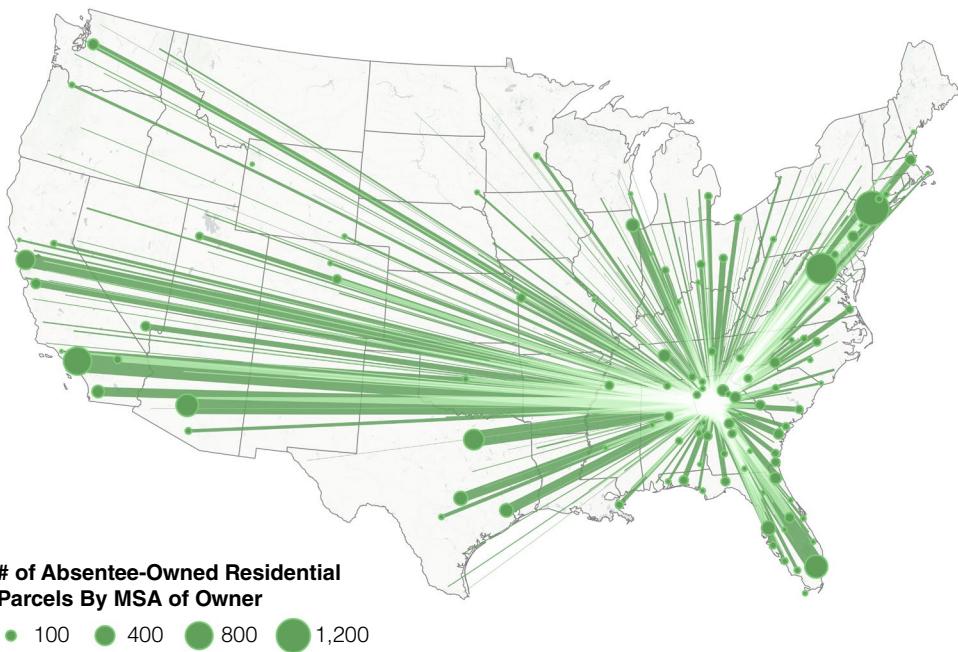


FIGURE 4 Mapping the relational geographies of ownership between metropolitan statistical areas

TABLE 2 Top 10 metropolitan statistical areas by total number of absentee-owned properties

Rank	MSA	# of Absentee-Owned Properties
1	New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA	1,224
2	Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	1,007
3	Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA	831
4	Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL	550
5	Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ	525
6	Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	439
7	San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA	382
8	Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL	200
9	Austin-Round Rock, TX	192
10	Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX	178

every major Southern MSA, but Figure 4 indicates a wide-ranging network of ownership that includes most urban areas in the country.

Figure 5 and Table 3 build on these ways of representing the relationality of absenteeism, but turning the focus back inwards to the *intra-urban* forms of absenteeism discussed in more detail above. Using the City of Atlanta's 248 officially designated neighborhoods as the unit of analysis allows us to simultaneously capture the concentration of absentee-owned *properties* themselves, alongside the concentration of the absentee *owners* who control them. The former are represented by green circles while the latter are represented by orange circles, with both values scaled proportionately. While most neighborhoods across the city have more absentee-owned properties within their borders than they do absentee owners, the inverse is true for a small number of neighborhoods, which are visible where the orange circle is larger than the green circle. Each of these neighborhoods is located in the greater Buckhead community in the city's north. However, like some of our earlier limitations with our data, these symbols include data only for properties located within the city limits, excluding the likely large number of properties in other jurisdictions outside Atlanta that are owned from within the city.

These maps and tables largely confirm findings presented earlier in the article, such as the fact that Midtown is the top neighborhood for absentee-owned properties in the city. However, Midtown also represents the neighborhood that is home to the most absentee *owners* of properties elsewhere across the city, in part due to the fact that the neighborhood has a high density of both residential properties and commercial offices, including those of landlords and property managers. For similar reasons, Atlanta's Downtown central business district has the third highest concentration of absentee-owned properties and the second highest concentration of absentee owners, while Old

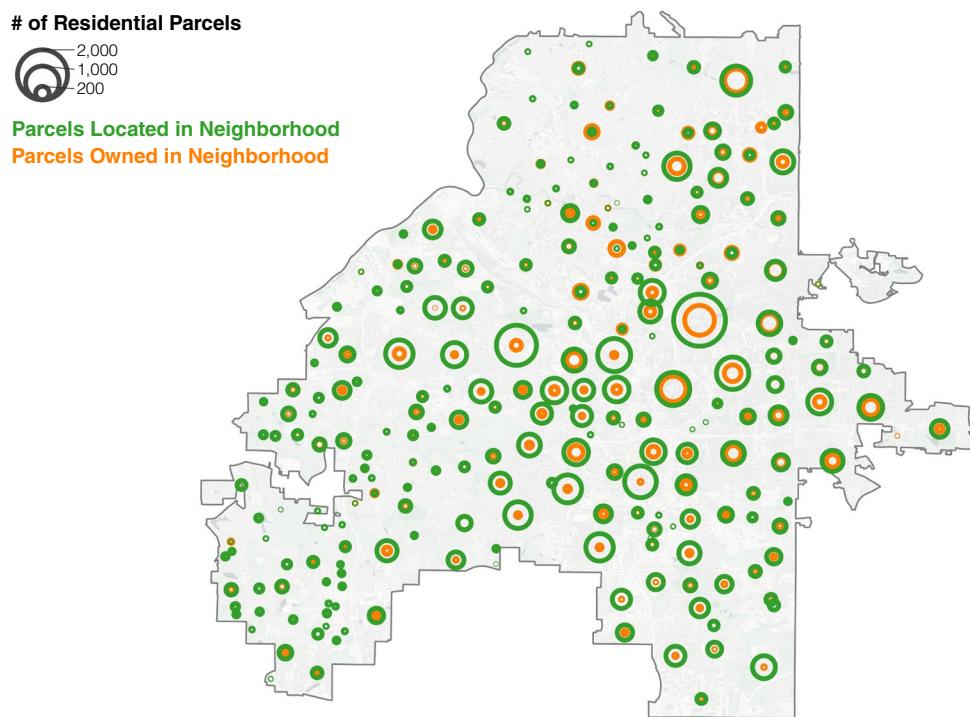


FIGURE 5 Atlanta neighborhoods by numbers of absentee-owned properties located within the neighborhood (green circles) and owned within the neighborhood (orange circles)

TABLE 3 Top 10 Atlanta neighborhoods by numbers of absentee-owned properties located within the neighborhood and owned within the neighborhood

Rank	Neighborhood	# of Absentee-Owned Properties Located in Neighborhood	Rank	Neighborhood	# of Absentee-Owned Properties Owned in Neighborhood
1	Midtown	2,131	1	Midtown	803
2	Grove Park	1,354	2	Downtown	610
3	Downtown	973	3	North Buckhead	517
4	English Avenue	965	4	Virginia-Highland	353
5	Old Fourth Ward	934	5-T	Old Fourth Ward	292
6	Pittsburgh	901	5-T	Morningside-Lenox Park	292
7	North Buckhead	773	7	Kirkwood	274
8	Oakland City	720	8	Grant Park	255
9	Collier Heights	705	9	Bankhead	243
10	Sylvan Hills	696	10	Peachtree Hills	237

Fourth Ward has the fifth highest in each category, and North Buckhead the seventh most absentee-owned properties and the third highest absentee ownership. Indeed, absentee-owned properties within these neighborhoods are predominantly owned by corporations rather than individuals, with 65.4% of properties Downtown, 60.7% of properties in Buckhead and 54.5% of properties in Midtown being registered to some kind of for-profit corporate entity.

Outside these few neighborhoods, the top 10 lists captured in Table 3 are demonstrative of the broader political-economic and racial-spatial divide within the city, and how absentee housing ownership helps to (re)produce such divides. The other six neighborhoods listed in the left-hand column are all predominantly Black and located on the city's west and south sides, though they vary from being relatively stable middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods to being some of the most economically marginalized in the city (at least historically). Meanwhile, those in the right column represent longstanding bastions of white affluence and more recently gentrified neighborhoods on the city's north and east sides, with the exception of the Bankhead neighborhood on the westside.

Though just two of these top 10 neighborhoods by absentee owners are located in the city's tony Buckhead area, the full concentration of this area's absentee ownership is masked by the fact that Buckhead is not a single neighborhood, but a collection of 43 different ones that are commonly lumped together. Our analysis finds that there are a total of 3,426 absentee-owned properties in Buckhead neighborhoods. Accounting for the fact that some of these are properties located in one of the constituent sub-neighborhoods and owned in a different one, we can better estimate that 2,347 properties elsewhere around the city are owned in Buckhead, well in excess of even Midtown and Downtown combined. This represents a flow of asset-based wealth from Atlanta's Blacker and less affluent (if not outright impoverished) neighborhoods towards its power center in the city's northern reaches. This wealth extraction stands in stark contrast to narratives offered during the area's campaign for secession from the City of Atlanta, which emphasized that Buckhead was a net contributor in tax revenue to the city relative to the value of services it received back (see, for example, Perdue, 2023). Those narratives failed to recognize, or strategically omitted, the fact that the property taxes paid by Buckhead residents and businesses are themselves the product of wealth stolen from the neighborhoods where Buckhead-owned properties are actually situated.

Conclusion

Empirically our analysis has demonstrated that the geographies of absentee ownership in Atlanta tend to follow a bifurcated pattern, where properties in predominantly poorer and Blacker neighborhoods are more likely to be owned by absentee owners nearby, either elsewhere within the city of Atlanta or in the metro area, especially in wealthier and whiter neighborhoods. However, some of these wealthier and whiter neighborhoods are also characterized by high levels of absenteeism, but of a very different character. These absentee owners are much further away, either outside the state of Georgia or the Southeast region altogether, pointing towards flows of wealthy people and their assets into the wealthier corners of the city as pieds-à-terre rather than rental income.

At a more conceptual level, we have shown that absenteeism works across multiple scales, not just between cities or metro areas but within them as well. Without such a multi-scalar analysis of what constitutes absenteeism, we would miss out on the large number of properties that represent a fundamentally extractive mode of absentee ownership, but which don't cross a jurisdictional boundary. Indeed, this rescaling of absenteeism allows us to more fully account for the racialized wealth extraction that takes from historically poorer and Blacker neighborhoods within Atlanta, further enriching the already wealthier and whiter neighborhoods elsewhere across the city and metro. Such a schematic for categories of absenteeism can be easily replicated in other contexts, allowing for a systematic comparison of absenteeism from place to place.

While part of this article is focused on elucidating the importance of more expansive spatial imaginaries for thinking about and visualizing property ownership, this is not strictly an academic or theoretical exercise. Absentee owners make critical decisions about the supply, affordability and quality of housing in cities they might never live in, or even visit, as is the case for so many of the city's most deteriorated and dangerous dwellings, according to a recent investigation by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Judd and Mariano, 2022). However, these absentee owners live outside the local spaces and social networks that could hold them accountable for their decisions and encourage them to reinvest in the community, leading them to instead produce built environments through undemocratic processes that work towards their private profit rather than the public good.

Even as out-of-state corporate landlords have drawn the attention of both local and state-level policymakers in Atlanta (Keenan, 2025a), some proposed interventions have run up against the political reality of the city being preempted from pursuing many policy options due to the state's conservative and landlord-friendly legislature (Barber and Dynes, 2023; Goodman and Hatch, 2023). The only housing-related bill to be passed in the Georgia General Assembly in its 2025 session sought to require in-state maintenance staff for properties owned by out-of-state companies (Keenan, 2025b). However, these stipulations were only applied to owners of 25 or more single-family rental properties, not to the many other kinds of absentee-owned housing we've identified in our analysis here, leaving a significant loophole for many absentee landlords of multifamily properties who are known to be the worst offenders, while also ignoring entirely the kinds of social problems created by absentee owners of pieds-à-terre or other high-end properties.

Ultimately, though, each of these policy interventions shares a similar failure to consider absenteeism on its own terms. Instead, they replicate the mistake—discussed earlier in this article in relation to the scholarly literature—of treating absenteeism as a process that is secondary or subsidiary to other manifestations of housing injustice, whether vacancy, abandonment and neglect, speculation, dispossession or something else. Nevertheless, absenteeism is still consistently invoked discursively to build support for these interventions into the harmful realities of contemporary housing and property markets, even without being addressed directly or in its entirety.

Through this analysis, we hope to center absentee ownership in and of itself as an important manifestation of, and a potential point of intervention for solving, the broader social inequalities that structure contemporary society and urban space. However, we crucially point towards the necessity of understanding absenteeism not in binary, black-or-white terms, but rather as a multi-scalar and relational process requiring intervention that cuts across spaces and scales that are often thought of as entirely separate and distinct.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Taylor Shelton, Department of Geosciences, Georgia State University, 730 Langdale Hall, Atlanta, Georgia 30303, USA, jshelton19@gsu.edu

Ryan Pardue, Urban Studies Institute, Georgia State University, 55 Park Place, 4 Floor, Atlanta, Georgia 30303, USA, rpardue1@student.gsu.edu

References

Alsup, A. and M. Klovski (2024) Owned away from home: exploring non-local ownership of U.S. housing. *Regrid*, 7 March [WWW document]. URL <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/90e246532816482398a3d15ecaaff976> (accessed 13 December 2025).

An, B.Y., A. Jakabovics, A.W. Orlando, S. Rodnyansky and E. Son (2024) Who owns America? A methodology for identifying landlords' ownership scale and the implications for targeted code enforcement. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 90.4, 627-41.

Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force ([1983] 2014) *Who owns Appalachia?: Landownership and its impact*. University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

Ashwood, L., J. Canfield, M. Fairbairn and K. De Master (2022) What owns the land: the corporate organization of farmland investment. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 49.2, 233-62.

Atkinson, R. (2019) Necroture: lifeless dwellings and London's super-rich. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43.1, 2-13.

Bailey, C., A. Gopaul, R. Thomson and A. Gunnoe (2021) Taking Goldschmidt to the woods: timberland ownership and quality of life in Alabama. *Rural Sociology* 86.1, 50-80.

Bain, N.R. (1984) Nonresident land-ownership: a potential factor in rural change. *Land Use Policy* 1.1, 64-71.

Barber, M. and A.M. Dynes (2023) City-state ideological incongruence and municipal preemption. *American Journal of Political Science* 67.1, 119-36.

Bawa, S.G. and S. Callahan (2021) *Absent landlords in agriculture—a statistical analysis*. ERR-281, US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Washington, D.C.

Charles, S.L. (2020) The financialization of single-family rental housing: an examination of real estate investment trusts' ownership of single-family houses in the Atlanta metropolitan area. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 42.8, 1321-41.

Chase, J. and D. Siegel (2012) Absentee ownership in the fire-prone northern California foothills. *Society & Natural Resources* 25.10, 1043-55.

Christophers, B. (2023) How and why US single-family housing became an investor asset class. *Journal of Urban History* 49.2, 430-49.

Cocola-Gant, A. and A. Gago (2021) Airbnb, buy-to-let investment and tourism-driven displacement: a case study in Lisbon. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 53.7, 1671-88.

Crump, J., K. Newman, E.S. Belsky, P. Ashton, D.H. Kaplan, D.J. Hammel and E. Wyly (2008) Cities destroyed (again) for cash: forum on the US foreclosure crisis. *Urban Geography* 29.8, 745-84.

David, E.L. and R.B. Skurski (1966) Property tax assessment and absentee owners. *National Tax Journal* 19.4, 421-6.

Desmond, M. (2016) *Evicted: poverty and profit in the American city*. Crown Publishing Group, New York, NY.

Desmond, M. and C. Gershenson (2016) Housing and employment insecurity among the working poor. *Social Problems* 63.1, 46-67.

Desmond, M. and R.T. Kimbro (2015) Eviction's fallout: housing, hardship, and health. *Social Forces* 94.1, 295-324.

Desmond, M. and K.L. Perkins (2016) Housing and household instability. *Urban Affairs Review* 52.3, 421-36.

Fairchild, E., J.D. Ulrich-Schad, P. Petrelka and Z. Ma (2022) The lay of the land: what we know about non-operating agricultural and absentee forest landowners in the U.S. and Europe. *Journal of Environmental Management* 313, 114991.

Fernandez, R., A. Hofman and M.B. Aalbers (2016) London and New York as a safe deposit box for the transnational wealth elite. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 48.12, 2443-61.

Ferrer, A.S. (2022) The corporate and geographical organization of the Los Angeles rent plantation. Master of Urban and Regional Planning Thesis, University of California - Los Angeles.

Fields, D. (2018) Constructing a new asset class: property-led financial accumulation after the crisis. *Economic Geography* 94.2, 118-40.

Fields, D. and M. Vergerio (2022) *Corporate landlords and market power: what does the single-family rental boom mean for our housing future?* University of California, Berkeley, CA.

Fisher, P.S. (1988) Absentee ownership of farmland and state and local tax policy: income tax promotes absenteeism, but the property tax can be used to strengthen family farms. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 47.1, 29-40.

GAO (2024) *Rental housing: information on institutional investment in single-family homes*. GAO-24-106643. US Government Accountability Office, Washington, DC.

Garboden, P.M. and E. Rosen (2019) Serial filing: how landlords use the threat of eviction. *City & Community* 18.2, 638-61.

Goodman, C.B. and M.E. Hatch (2023) State preemption and affordable housing policy. *Urban Studies* 60.6, 1048-65.

Hall, M., K. Crowder and A. Spring (2015) Neighborhood foreclosures, racial/ethnic transitions, and residential segregation. *American Sociological Review* 80.3, 526-49.

Hangen, F. and D.T. O'Brien (2025) Linking landlords to uncover ownership obscurity. *Housing Studies* 40.4, 940-65.

Hobson, M.J. (2017) *The legend of the Black Mecca: politics and class in the making of modern Atlanta*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC.

Hochstenbach, C. (2024) Networked geographies of private landlordism: mapping flows of capital accumulation and rent extraction. *Housing Studies* 39.9, 2234-59.

Immergluck, D. (2011) *Foreclosed: high-risk lending, deregulation, and the undermining of America's mortgage market*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Immergluck, D. (2022) *Red hot city: housing, race, and exclusion in twenty-first-century Atlanta*. University of California Press, Oakland, CA.

Immergluck, D. and J. Law (2014) Speculating in crisis: the intrametropolitan geography of investing in foreclosed homes in Atlanta. *Urban Geography* 35.1, 1-24.

Jackson, D. (2022) Atlanta has the highest income inequality in the nation, Census data shows. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 28 November [WWW document]. URL <https://archive.ph/fzHh6> (accessed 13 December 2025).

Judd, A. and W. Mariano (2022) Making money from misery. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 13 June [WWW document]. URL <https://archive.ph/JGra9> (accessed 13 December 2025).

Keenan, S. (2025a) Are state lawmakers warming to a crackdown on Wall Street homeownership? *Atlanta Civic Circle*, 26 February [WWW document]. URL <https://atlantaciviccircle.org/2025/02/26/georgia-legislature-institutional-investor-housing-crackdown/> (accessed 13 December 2025).

Keenan, S. (2025b) Bill passes for out-of-state landlords to have Georgia staff for tenant issues. *Atlanta Civic Circle*, 7 April [WWW document]. URL <https://atlantaciviccircle.org/2025/04/07/georgia-bill-regulating-out-of-state-landlords-passes/> (accessed 13 December 2025).

Maharawal, M.M. and E. McElroy (2018) The anti-eviction mapping project: counter mapping and oral history toward Bay Area housing justice. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108.2, 380-9.

Malcomson, A.P.W. (1974) Absenteeism in eighteenth century Ireland. *Irish Economic and Social History* 1.1, 15-35.

Massey, D. (1991) A global sense of place. *Marxism Today* 35.6, 24-9.

McKenzie, R. and R. Atkinson (2020) Anchoring capital in place: the grounded impact of international wealth chains on housing markets in London. *Urban Studies* 57.1, 21-38.

Mitchell, B., J. Edlebi, H.C.S. Meier, J. Richardson, J. Dean and L. Chen (2025) Displaced by design: fifty years of gentrification and black cultural displacement in US cities. *National Community Reinvestment Coalition*, May [WWW document]. URL <https://nrcrc.org/displaced-by-design/> (accessed 13 December 2025).

Niedt, C. and I.W. Martin (2013) Who are the foreclosed? A statistical portrait of America in crisis. *Housing Policy Debate* 23.1, 159-76.

Perdue, J.T. (2023) A review of Buckhead's four biggest policy concerns. *Georgia Public Policy Foundation*, 8 November [WWW document]. URL <https://www.georgiapolicy.org/publications/a-review-of-buckheads-four-biggest-policy-concerns/> (accessed 13 December 2025).

Petach, L. and I. Crowther (2024) Absentee ownership and rental affordability: evidence from commuting zones. *Forum for Social Economics*, 1-17.

Petrzelka, P. (2014) Absentee landlords and agriculture. In P.B. Thompson and D.M. Kaplan (eds.), *Encyclopedia of food and agricultural ethics*, Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht.

Preis, B. (2024) Where the landlords are: a network approach to landlord-rental locations. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 114.8, 1757-68.

Purifoy, D.M. and L. Seamster (2021) Creative extraction: Black towns in white space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 39.1, 47-66.

Raymond, E.L., R. Duckworth, B. Miller, M. Lucas and S. Pokharel (2018) From foreclosure to eviction: housing insecurity in corporate-owned single-family rentals. *Cityscape* 20.3, 159-88.

Rogers, D. and S.Y. Koh (2017) The globalisation of real estate: the politics and practice of foreign real estate investment. *International Journal of Housing Policy* 17.1, 1-14.

Rose, G. and R. Harris (2022) The three tenures: a case of property maintenance. *Urban Studies* 59.9, 1926-43.

Saegert, S., D. Fields and K. Libman (2011) Mortgage foreclosure and health disparities: serial displacement as asset extraction in African American populations. *Journal of Urban Health* 88, 390-402.

Seymour, E., T. Shelton, S.A. Sherman and J. Akers (2025) The metropolitan and neighborhood geographies of REIT- and private equity-owned single-family rentals. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 47.6, 1998-2022.

Shelton, T. (2018a) Rethinking the RECAP: mapping the relational geographies of concentrated poverty and affluence in Lexington, Kentucky. *Urban Geography* 39.7, 1070-91.

Shelton, T. (2018b) Mapping dispossession: eviction, foreclosure and the multiple geographies of housing instability in Lexington, Kentucky. *Geoforum* 97, 281-91.

Shelton, T. (2021) Gameday homes: mapping emerging geographies of housing speculation and absentee ownership in the American South. *Cities* 115, 103230.

Shelton, T. (2022a) Situated mapping: visualizing urban inequality between the god trick and strategic positivism. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 21.4, 346-56.

Shelton, T. (2022b) Atlanta's ur-choropleths. *Mapping Atlanta*, 1 May [WWW document]. URL <https://mappngatlanta.org/2022/05/01/atlantas-ur-choropleths/> (accessed 13 December 2025).

Shelton, T. (2024) Challenging opacity, embracing fuzziness: geographical thought and praxis in a post-truth age. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 14.2, 352-6.

Shelton, T. and E. Seymour (2024) Horizontal holdings: untangling the networks of corporate landlords. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 114.8, 1819-31.

Smith, G. and S. Duda (2009) *Roadblock to recovery: examining the disparate impact of vacant lender-owned properties in Chicago*. Woodstock Institute, Chicago, IL.

Stiman, M. (2020) Second homes in the city and the country: a reappraisal of vacation homes in the twenty-first century. *International Journal of Housing Policy* 20.1, 53-74.

Stokes, S. (2018) How Atlanta became the capital of income inequality. *WABE News*, 31 October [WWW document]. URL <https://www.wabe.org/atlanta-income-inequality/> (accessed 13 December 2025).

Van Sant, L., T. Shelton and K. Kay (2023) Connecting country and city: the multiple geographies of real property ownership in the US. *Geography Compass* 17.2, e12677.

Wachsmuth, D. and A. Weisler (2018) Airbnb and the rent gap: gentrification through the sharing economy. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50.6, 1147-70.

Ward, P.M. and J. Carew (2000) Absentee lot owners in Texas colonias: who are they, and what do they want? *Habitat International* 24.3, 327-45.

Wegmann, J. (2020) Residences without residents: assessing the geography of ghost dwellings in big US cities. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 42.8, 1103-24.