BEYOND RIVERTOWN: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR CHESTER’S DEVELOPMENT

AN HONORS THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE SIXTH DAY OF MAY 2020

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE HONORS PROGRAM

OF NEWCOMB-TULANE COLLEGE

TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF ARTS

WITH HONORS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

BY

Alexander LeFebvre

APPROVED: Patrick Egan
Director of Thesis

Ruth Carlitzi
Second Reader

Lee P. Gary Jr.
Third Reader
Abstract

This thesis will argue that Rivertown has failed to meet expectations because it is part of a broader neoliberal development system that privileges corporate and wealthy interests while in the development process and does not directly address the needs of the community. This development model continues to be perpetuated due to a powerful urban regime that can extract resources from vulnerable communities while using the normative rhetoric of economic progress to justify their extraction. The Rivertown development in Chester, Pennsylvania, has failed to live up to expectations and provide benefits to its community despite receiving millions in public funding. At the heart of this failure is the neoliberal development model, where financial shareholders are prioritized and supported by public funding while the primary stakeholders, those living in the community being developed, are marginalized. Across America, especially in post-industrial urban cores, predatory development is crippling any chance of a sustainable future. By critiquing Rivertown, this paper hopes to offer a counter to the largely uncontested neoliberal policies and the systems that sustain and reproduce it. It will first establish an alternative framework utilizing decolonial theory and a comparative analysis with Benton Harbor, Michigan, to analyze the policies that have led to Rivertown and understand the roles of actors and finances that were involved. Methods of research include local newspaper and public document investigation, as well as examining return on investment and employment, two of the central promises that Rivertown has failed in delivering to Chester. This thesis, while focused on Chester and Rivertown, carries the potential for a wider critique of contemporary urban development strategies and pinpoint how they are being reproduced.
Acknowledgements

I am overwhelmed with gratitude for all the support and inspiration I received during this grueling yet rewarding process. First of all, I want to appreciate Dr. Mya Alexander-Owen, an associate lecturer at the University of St. Andrews, who first introduced me to many of the giants in decolonial theory and ignited my desire to learn more about how it connects beyond just Political Science and into the everyday of my own life. My worldview has been irrevocably shaped by hers, and for that I am infinitely grateful. My friends in both Scotland and New Orleans, including Charly Anderson, Ali Drabu, Harry Dean, and Wasef Atiya have been willing proofreaders and critics of my thesis, as well as providing a shared solidarity as we all went through this challenging process together. I would like to also thank Dr. Christopher Mele, perhaps the leading academic voice regarding Chester, Devon Walls and Ulysses Slaughter at Chester Made, and Laurie Zierer at the Pennsylvania Humanities Council for their insight about Chester and challenging me to think harder. They are doing some amazing work in Chester, which you can learn more about here. I could have done none of this without the loving support of my family, in particular my two sisters, parents, and grandparents who are all a consistent inspiration to me and push me to take advantage of every opportunity to learn and grow. Finally, I want to thank my incredible thesis committee, led by Dr. Egan, who have been instrumental in helping me develop and refine my argument. They gave me their time and wisdom, which for me was absolutely invaluable. I feel tremendously fortunate to have had the support of such and amazing and diverse committee.
# Table of Contents

Part I: Introduction..............................................................................................................1

Part II: Theoretical Framework..........................................................................................7
  2.1: Coloniality..................................................................................................................8
  2.2: The White Urban Regime..........................................................................................14
  2.3: The Extraction Machine...........................................................................................18

Part III: Chester..................................................................................................................21
  3.1: A Brief History of Chester.........................................................................................22
  3.2: The Origins of Rivertown..........................................................................................27
  3.3: Developing the Waterfront.......................................................................................30

Part IV: Discussion..............................................................................................................35
  4.1: Vision for the Future.................................................................................................35
  4.2: Myths of Development............................................................................................39
  4.3: Applying the Theoretical Framework.......................................................................43

Part V: Conclusions............................................................................................................46

Bibliography........................................................................................................................49
List of Figures

Map 1: Philadelphia Suburbs, Median Household Income ................................................. 2
Map 2: Philadelphia Suburbs, Percent White ........................................................................ 2
Map 3: KOZs in Chester, PA .................................................................................................. 28
Map 4: Economic Development Map of Chester .................................................................... 36

Photo 1: Chester in the 1950s ................................................................................................. 22
Photo 2: Chester today ............................................................................................................ 22
Part I: Introduction

The city of Chester is situated on the banks of the Delaware River, a mere thirteen miles southwest of Philadelphia. Upon first inspection, it may seem like somewhat of an anomaly considering the surrounding area. The suburbs to the north are called the Main Line, one of the wealthiest areas in the country. This vast discrepancy between the wealth located on the Main Line, West Chester, and Chester is illustrated in Map 1. Philadelphia’s suburbs are also starkly divided by racial demographics, as demonstrated with Map 2. Delaware County is Pennsylvania’s richest county, but Chester is its poorest city (Mele 2017, 4). The boarded-up storefronts, smokestacks bellowing out noxious fumes, and endless reports of homicide or drug busts have become visible symbols of just how far the city has fallen. Rivertown, that so far includes a soccer stadium, a casino, an office complex, and a prison, has been heralded as a new era in Chester’s history that could restore it to its former glory.

Chester, Pennsylvania, is emblematic of many post-industrial cities across this country. Once home to a vibrant blue-collar population, it has since fallen precipitously. Constantly ranked among the most destitute and most dangerous places to live, Chester has become a place that is largely avoided by surrounding suburbs. But over the past two decades, there has been a concerted effort by the state and local government to stimulate economic growth in Chester by developing the former industrial waterfront area, which they dubbed “Rivertown.” Rivertown, by all metrics, has failed to be the economic sparkplug that
Beyond Rivertown: A New Framework for Chester’s Development


hundreds of millions in public subsidies. Since the 1980s, urban development across America and the Global South has been dominated by neoliberal projects such as this one, where public funding is appropriated to fuel private development in the name of economic growth with minimal participation by and few benefits for the existing population. Despite this, the neoliberal approach to development is still being promoted as the only solution in Chester for the failures it has been a part of. Hence, the key questions are why does this model fail and what are the underlying systems that perpetuate it? This thesis will argue that Rivertown has failed to meet expectations because it is part of a broader neoliberal development system that privileges corporate and wealthy interests while in the development process and does not directly address the needs of the community. This development model continues to be perpetuated due to a powerful urban regime that can extract resources from vulnerable communities while using the normative rhetoric of economic progress to justify their extraction.

Neoliberal development is what has come to be understood as essentially a transition from the state as the provider of services and welfare to a more competitive, monetized system in which economic growth trumps all else, and cities must use public resources to compete for private and federal investment (Peck and Tickell 2002, 385; Miraftab 2004, 91; Weber 2002, 537). Normalizing language associated with economic growth such as “opportunity, innovation, and investment” helps to gloss over the increasing class and racial discrepancies that subsidizing the rich and cutting welfare to the poor would create (Peck and Tickell 2002, 394–95). Federal aid and private investment are selectively given to cities based on the potential for economic growth, and so even local officials who genuinely wish
to help their communities are coerced into competing for funding and as will be examined later, essentially selling off their constituency’s well-being and civil rights for the profit of third-party investors (Mele 2011, 324; Peck and Tickell 2002, 395).

This “roll-back” of public responsibility is especially problematic due to the inherent conflict between “profit-driven” private actors and “welfare-driven” public ones, and the federal state must act as the regulator for these partnerships to ensure the local government is not overwhelmed by the private investor (Miraftab 2004, 89). However, when the federal state is promoting neoliberalism, it is not so much a “roll-back” so much as it is a clear promotion of “capital subsidies, place promotion, supply-side intervention, central-city makeovers, and local boosterism” (Harvey 1989, 12; Peck and Tickell 2002, 394–95). This creates a corrupt, systematic social network of exchanges between politicians and the private sector that is mutually beneficial and fractures society between winners and losers in this polarized system. This fractured globalist nature of neoliberalism creates fundamentally extreme experiences that are isolated against each other yet exist synchronously. Where the beneficiaries of neoliberal development see increased participation in democracy, opportunity, and a boosted economy, their disadvantaged counterparts find themselves caught in an increasingly suffocating system of unemployment, incarceration, disenfranchisement, and authoritarianism (Peck and Tickell 2002, 395).

The 1980s were the years in which neoliberal policies took center stage in international development, as governments cut back spending and instead gave private corporations full
autonomy for lending money and services to the Global South. This resulted in widespread human misery and crippling debt for developing countries, the consequences of which they are still feeling today. Pure market-based development failed so spectacularly in the developing world that the United Nations has since dubbed it the “lost decade of development” (Iverson 2017). Despite its catastrophic results, however, it is still popular in American development, particularly in decaying post-industrial cities that lack access to capital. Across the country, city governments are scrambling to attract multinational corporations and private investment as their primary strategy for development. The desperate scramble for the new Amazon headquarters in 2018, including a bid from Chester, is one of the most high-profile examples of this dated approach. Its proposed site in Queens, New York, was met with fierce opposition led by Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who rightly pointed out that a company that is receiving tax breaks, resisting unionization, and contributing to the rising housing costs and gentrification of the neighborhood had very little potential to improve the lives of the residents who live there (Nwanevu 2019).

This aggressive neoliberalism essentially amounts to replacement and wealth distribution instead of the recovery and wealth generation that is promised (Harvey 2006, 153). This “accumulation by dispossession” is obfuscated by normative language and its real power lies in the hegemony of the discourse to the point where few other alternatives are even considered (Harvey 2006, 145, 156). Still, there are plenty of powerful voices who would argue that neoliberalism has propelled the world forward into a new age of globalization that has lifted billions out of poverty, a final and conclusive stage of economic
development. It is a powerful ideology that has been closely integrated with Western identity and nationalism for much of recent memory.

The first part of this thesis will build a theoretical framework that is rigorous enough to be able to understand why this model of development has failed in Chester, and why it continues to be touted as a panacea for Chester’s decline. Incorporating theorizing from a similar city, Benton Harbor, Michigan, and the Global South, this thesis will seek to understand Rivertown in the context of conversations that are happening in other locations across that have embraced this destructive model of development. Louise Seamster’s models of the white urban regime and the extraction machine are particularly helpful in understanding the complexity and nuance of urban development. The second part of this thesis will begin with a brief history of Chester and the conditions which led to Rivertown, focusing on the actors and policies that were instrumental in its creation. It will describe the historical cynical exploitation of race and class that has marked Chester’s history, while also touching on Chester’s rich history of activism. Subsequently, it will look at the process of creating Rivertown, its ambitions, and to what extent it has fallen short of expectations. Through the use of both primary and secondary sources, newspaper articles, and financial analysis, Rivertown has brought very few benefits to Chester, especially considering the sheer amount of public funding that went into it. Finally, this thesis will apply the theoretical framework to Rivertown to gain a better understanding of how these historical processes play out in Chester and what the implications are for the future, both in Chester and similarly across the “American subaltern.”
Part II: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will develop a critical theory of urban development that takes into account both race and decolonial theory that is rigorous enough to understand both the history surrounding and the future implications of Rivertown in a framework that goes beyond the normative tropes of economic development. A framework for analysis will be developed that applies the white urban regime theory and extraction model within a broader colonial framework. This border thinking, as will be discussed, applies to Chester because of similar historical conditions of coloniality. This paper will then cultivate Seamster’s (2016) analysis of Benton Harbor, Michigan, to include a consideration of decolonial theory and help to link domestic urban development to a broader phenomenon of colonial extraction. This will allow for a future analysis of Chester, Pennsylvania’s Rivertown development plan that has the theoretical rigor and scope to truly understand the nuances of the situation and how this plan fits into a larger conversation around urban development.

Throughout the chapter, terminology such as neoliberalism, the subaltern, coloniality, and urban regimes will be used. Neoliberalism is a radical descendant of Adam Smith’s laissez-faire market economy that “proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets, free trade,” and minimal state interventionism” (Harmes 2012, 63–64; Harvey 2006, 145). The subaltern is defined by
Homi Bhabha, who describes it as following: “oppressed minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group” (1996, 209–10). Thus, a subaltern usually implies the existence and perpetuation of a racial hierarchy in that community. While usually applied to the former European colonies, this essay will also use it to describe what will be known henceforth as the “American subaltern,” namely urban communities in the United States who are experiencing similar conditions of coloniality. Coloniality is summarized by Walter Mignolo as the “underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilization from the Renaissance to today, of which historical colonialism has been a constitutive yet downplayed dimension” (2011, 2). While formal colonialism ended after World War II, decolonial scholars argue that its legacy has persisted, and the world order remains fundamentally unchanged. Finally, Seamster describes an urban regime as “an ongoing economic, political and social relations in which a shifting coalition of mostly-white executives, government workers, developers, and non-profit workers circumvented elected government in Benton Harbor to obtain grants and land; make decisions; and plan, implement or abandon development projects” (2016, 36).

2.1: Coloniality

Coloniality was introduced by Aníbal Quijano in the late 1980s as a Latin American response to globalization (Mignolo 2011, 2), and has roots in post-colonialism, dependency theory, Franz Fanon’s sociogenesis, and Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory. Instead of treating history as a linear progression, the theory highlights some of the themes and spaces of colonization that have remained constant throughout modern Western history. Decolonial theory has historically only been applied by Latin American and
Caribbean scholars to their own countries and communities, or what they call the subaltern, but this thesis will argue that decoloniality is also an effective tool to analyze the chronic failures of the American subaltern. Some scholars have suggested that communities are governed domestically as internal colonies, arguing low-income, black/Latino, and urban populations in the United States see similar political, environmental, and economic issues as many urban centers across the developing world (Marr 2016, 5–9; Atkinson and Bridge 2004, 7–8; Vasudevan and Smith 2020, 4). These include local governance serving the interests of outside speculators; huge, subsidized infrastructure contracts; corruption; political and economic disenfranchisement; high rates of crime; and increased exposure to environmental hazards.

The story of modern civilization is mostly started from the Renaissance or Enlightenment, with each of these starting points creating the illusion of a natural linearization of Western history, marked by advances in technology, industry, and thinking (Mignolo 2000, 722–23). The fall of the Soviet Union provided the natural culmination of these narratives into a developed world and a developing world. Decolonialists argue that globalization is not a new ontological category, but rather a new adaptation of coloniality that fits international norms, with Edward Said writing: “Westerners may have physically left their old colonies… but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually” The legitimizing distinction initially between the Europeans and the other was the Christianity, and over the years saving the infidels morphed into civilizing, modernizing, democratizing, or developing the
Beyond Rivertown: A New Framework for Chester’s Development

subaltern (Mignolo 2000, 725). This normative language of greater good helped to hide the military conquest, economic expansion, and massive injustices that were fueling European progress (Wallerstein 2006, 1). This thesis aims to draw a line connecting this worldview to the processes of accumulation that are taking place in Chester.

The epistemic privilege of the developed world allows Western social scientists to have total authority over their discipline, and the nexus that connects modern knowledge with modern regimes of power leaves the developing world to forever be simply “consumers of universal modernity” instead of as “serious producers” (Mignolo 2009, 166; Chatterjee 1997, 14). This means that to create true knowledge, it must be of the Western tradition and language, confining ontological debates within this flawed epistemology (Fanon 2008, 17–18). This idea of universality also has very detrimental effects in processes of development as it creates an imposed receptivity in colonial subjects and allows the colonizer to proclaim what is good for them (Banerjea 2002, 573). This imposed receptivity of modernity bolsters the image of the other in both the Christian social imaginary and in the minds of whom development is being forced upon, leading to the subaltern unconsciously forfeiting their agency in shaping their future (Mudimbe-Boyi 2002, 35; Quijano 2007, 169). Western knowledge, development, and culture is passively accepted as superior, and responsibility for the failure to implement any of them falls on the places they are imposed upon (Banerjea 2002, 573; Mudimbe-Boyi 2002, 38). In Chester, this dynamic is very clear, with developers given complete authority to prescribe what is best for the residents, but when it does not work out often the residents are blamed for not “taking advantage” of the economic opportunity.
The modern economic system is based on two dual colonialities, one imposed on nature and the other on humans. The colonial powers developed a system of resource and human exploitation that consequently generated huge amounts of wealth (Mignolo 2011, 11). They saw nature simply as natural resources, existing solely to benefit the Western economy. The rapid generation of capital, however, reinforced the virtues of capitalism, and all contradictory knowledge was excluded. Cash crops, plantations, and mines were set up across the subaltern to provide for the West, and this economic model constructed the subaltern as dependent. Human endeavor was reconstructed into a system of slavery, and after to waged labor, but always divided by race (Mignolo 2011, 12). As globalization unfolded, this racial divide became increasingly important to maintain control of who could reap the benefits (Appadurai 1998, 243).

The decolonial challenge, then, is to understand how the system operates, and then employing border thinking to decolonize and reclaim the language surrounding development (Mignolo 2011, 9; Quijano and Ennis 2000, 177). Mignolo outlines four important questions to ask when examining a system or policy from a decolonial perspective, adapted from Immanuel Kant’s four questions of philosophy. They are:

1. Who is the knowing subject and what is his/her material apparatus of enunciation?
2. What kind of knowledge/understanding is he/she engaged in generating, and why?
3. Who is benefitting or taking advantage of such-and-such knowledge or understanding?
4. What institutions (universities, media, foundations, government, corporations) are supporting and encouraging such and such knowledge and understanding. (Mignolo 2011, 188–89)
New possibilities emerge when these questions are employed. They allow for a renewed emphasis and value on the primary stakeholders of society, ones that are often forgotten in the pursuit of generating wealth (Mignolo 2009, 178). With regards to capitalism itself, the question becomes not so much how the subaltern can be developed within the existing modes of capitalist options and thinking, but rather why capitalism itself is being prioritized over the welfare of human beings (Mignolo 2009, 178). These questions will guide how this thesis will consider the development process in Chester.

Decolonial thinking posits a concept of duel modernity, where the epistemology and universality of Western concepts are challenged rather than the concepts themselves. By de-linking Western modernity from universal applicability, scholars such as Kant or Hegel are seen to be philosophizing for a specific time and place. The dichotomy between modernity and tradition is weakened to the point where these concepts are seen to only exist in the imaginary, and not as real concepts like they are presented as in developmental theory (Kant 1998; Mignolo 2011, 180). These pluriversal modernities allow for a more complete realization of enlightenment where everyone is “participating instead of being participated,” and rather than being victimized by the domination of singular powers and institutions, the subaltern is given the space to perform similar functions how they see fit (Dussel 1993, 76; Mignolo 2000, 742–43; 2011, 23). There is a critical need in the subaltern for their dignity and prosperity to be prioritized over global designs of growth and development (Taylor 1997, 98–99; Mignolo 2011, 304).
Scholarship that comes from the geopolitics of exclusion and coloniality is referred to as border gnosis and thinking (Mignolo 2000, 736), and can provide insight into enunciating the experience of the subaltern. Decolonial thinking opens the possibility of new ideas and concepts, and for development theorists and policymakers this should be an exciting option to try and remedy some of the structurally and continued failures of developmental practices. This epistemological shift in thinking is very radical, however, and the permanence of the colonial matrix is a formidable obstacle. From the ego-politics of modernity, it is hard for scholars and policymakers to see it from the perspective of coloniality and as a co-constitutive element of it. It strikes at all the underlying assumptions of Western civilization, the narrative of progress that is the beating heart of democracy and capitalism.

The concept of duel modernity, however, offers hope in breaking down these epistemological differences. Partha Chatterjee argues that a concept of modernity from the subaltern can be coexistent with one from the West if the West accepts the inherent pluriversality of the term (1997). Therefore, capitalism and democracy are perfectly valid systems to work with, as long as the Western powers recognize who they are working for and that they are a specific solution in a specific context. Development in the subaltern would benefit greatly, as the classic one size fits all approach taken by the West to promote economic and now sustainable development has produced uneven results. In the American subaltern, this would allow for greater autonomy and the recognition that these concepts also produce uneven results across the United States, which itself was originally a colony, but has since been integrated into the “European” tradition of coloniality.
It may seem strange that subaltern of America has been excluded from broader decolonial scholarship, as after all, the blacks and Native Americans have experienced similar historical processes in both, but by defining America as part of the Global North, scholars can point out the colonial practices of the American government in developing/colonizing the Global South. In enunciating this dichotomy, however, this paper argues that decolonial scholarship loses the ability to analyze coloniality outside of the Western-made constructs of nation-states and that the American subaltern is thereby excluded from the broader processes of continued coloniality. Applying and adapting decolonial theory to the American subaltern will challenge the prevailing norms and narratives, give Americans a better sense of the systemic coloniality that exits, and provide insight for more effective solutions to urban development that will increase the prosperity of those who have been continuously hurt by it.

2.2: The White Urban Regime

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight the flow and distribution of money, power, and assets, the weaponization of race and racialized rhetoric, and a long-standing tradition of colonial extraction and control that have colluded to produce remarkable deprivation in the Chester community. To understand how Rivertown relates to other big development projects, and to further gain insight into the complex systems that have produced it, this thesis will conduct a comparative analysis and examination of Louise Seamster’s study of Benton Harbor, Michigan (2016).
Benton Harbor is analogous to Chester for several reasons, including its industrial heritage, an impoverished, urban, majority-black population governed by a majority-white urban regime, extreme wealth inequality with the surrounding area, and crucially, high-end development happening on its waterfront. Seamster develops a relational framework with which she can gain insight into the failures of neoliberal development and analyze specific projects into a larger trajectory of exclusion and extraction. The two major components of her framework are a white urban regime and the city as an extraction machine. Together, these offer a new lens from which to understand urban development in the American subaltern and can add some important analysis on the foundation upon which Rivertown was conceived.

Seamster proposes that a white urban regime governs Benton Harbor, adapting urban regime analysis to incorporate race (2016, 59). Urban regime analysis traditionally looks at informal networks and alliances to understand how power, decision-making, and “nondecision-making” operate within a city (Seamster 2016, 36). Clarence Stone posits that systemic power, or indirect, situational power that is exerted by the system upon different actors, can predispose these actors to favor the interests of some over others (2008, 36–40). Systemic power influences the capacity to govern, which is determined in part by ownership of political and economic resources (Stone 2008, 81). In such a system, retail politics may have the illusion of being the theater in which political battles are fought, but in reality, the real decision making happens out of the public eye (Seamster 2016, 37). In practice, this helps to explain why a corporate executive may be able to wield more influence and shape policy more so than a group of primary stakeholders in the community.
Beyond Rivertown: A New Framework for Chester’s Development

(Stone 1987, 270–71). While these are tough systems to break into for normal citizens, they still hold nominal political capital in their votes. Adding a well-informed electorate to the governing coalition is possible, but they need to collectively organize and demand a seat at the table to stand any chance of having their interests advanced (Mossberger 2008, 42; Du Bois 1904, 10). The mass disenfranchisement, however, that communities like Chester and Benton Harbor face strip them of their political power (Alexander 2012, 1–2; Caulkins et al. 2005, 24–25).

Seamster’s main critique of urban regime analysis is that it ignores the constitutional nature of race in American cities. She argues that race as an ordering concept has always been central to modern political and economic systems, even now in what is considered by some as a “post-racial” period (Seamster 2016, 38). Race in itself is a “social contract” that establishes insiders and outsiders in a community and projects negative characteristics and stereotypes on to the subordinate group by the dominant one (Bratter and Chukhray 2016, 2; Mills 2014, 3). Civil Rights brought a degree of equity, but the racial formation in this country runs much deeper than these surface-level reforms (Bonilla-Silva 1997), including in critical areas such as housing, urban renewal, municipal infrastructure, insurance, annexation, districting, zoning, taxes, healthcare, environmental issues, and criminal justice (Seamster 2016, 39–40; Lipsitz 2011, 2). The continued segregation of communities and neighborhoods helps to sustain these patterns (Seamster 2016, 40), and without reckoning with the saliency race still holds in urban politics, it is impossible to fully understand how urban regimes operate.
With this in mind, Adolph Reed put forward the idea of a black urban regime (1999). Contesting the notion of monolithic black politics, he posits that there is a black urban elite that is charged with “racial custodianship” by their white counterparts (Reed 1999, 18). This access to power is conditional, controlled by (primarily white) institutions, who pressure the black elite to privilege private interests before those of their electorate (Seamster 2016, 41). The coercive, carrot or stick tendencies of capitalism are enough to continually reproduce this dynamic, and bring the appearance of progress and legitimacy without altering the system in which the oppression and inequalities were first produced (Reed 1999, 88; Seamster 2016, 42). In Benton Harbor this dynamic is clear with Whirlpool, the city’s largest employer (although very few of those employees are from Benton Harbor), with roots going back over a century in the city, using a coalition of non-profits to facilitate the construction of a luxury golf course on their Waterfront that has provided little benefit to the city (Seamster 2016, 106–7). They were able to coerce the local government into signing on to the project by being the only game in town, and the assured misery that would result from doing nothing in the way of development (Seamster 2016, 144).

Finally, Seamster arrives at her analytical concept of a white urban regime. In her analysis of Benton Harbor, she proposes that despite having a black mayor, the city is governed by a white urban regime. She brings race into her adaptation of urban regime analysis and can create a more applicable framework for places such as Benton Harbor or Chester. She identifies a white urban regime as having a “racialized network of business people, landowners, developers, nonprofit heads, and philanthropists” who can gain access to the
political system without being elected, black elites who are granted conditional authority and reframe the white urban regime’s agenda in terms that seem favorable to the residents, members who live outside the city but hold vast economic resources and grant money, and control over and the ability to reframe the narrative in terms favorable to advancing their interests (Seamster 2016, 61–62). As will be explored over the course of this thesis, the white urban regime operates through the aligning of private, public, and non-profit sectors to create the illusion that the economic interests of the private sector and the welfare-driven interests of the public one are aligned (Seamster 2016, 63).

2.3: The Extraction Machine

The second part of Seamster’s framework is understanding the city as an extraction machine. This is adapted from Logan and Molotch’s concept of a “growth machine,” which seeks to understand why cities have repeatedly prioritized growth, development, and private interests (Logan and Molotch 2010; Seamster 2016, 33). Similarly to the urban regime, it conflates the city’s economic interests with the interests of its residents, even though the primary stakeholders rarely see the benefits of this pro-growth orientation (Seamster 2016, 34). This growth-oriented, neoliberal adaptation of trickle-down economics has been repeatedly shown to fail on the international stage but is still a powerful force on the national stage because of the earning potential of governments and private interests alike (Iverson 2017; Seamster 2016, 34; Harvey 2006). The growth machine theory does not, however, address the uneven spatial and racial dynamics that are a constitutive element of wealth creation (Seamster 2016, 35).
To address these shortcomings, Seamster adapts the growth machine concept to what she calls an extraction machine (2016, 65). Instead of arguing neoliberal development intends to create economic growth, Seamster argues that it, in reality, a zero-sum relationship that redistributes economic value from the poor to the rich, and the resulting wealth is created in tandem with poverty (2016, 65). She then continues to list four characteristics of an extraction machine: that creative destruction is utilized so that a community’s loss can benefit the urban regime, economic growth is generated through taking, land is seen as an extractable public asset, and “the unequal outcomes generated from extraction (underdevelopment) paradoxically serve to justify future extraction” (2016, 67). This predatory accumulation by dispossession is clear in popular policies such as privatization, land and asset appropriation or devaluation, and indebtedness (Harvey 2006; Seamster 2016, 66). This is a pure example of the symbiotic nature of race and capital, a superstructure that is central to decolonial theory (Fanon 2005, 40) Thus, Seamster likens this to a colonial relationship (2016, 66). In the context of Benton Harbor, Seamster sees this operating in the processes that first devalued and laid waste to the lakefront, and then the same people (in this case, Whirlpool) capitalizing on the cheap land to extract it from the city and transform it into a gentrified space (Seamster 2016, 126–27, 134). In Chester, a similar process has taken place on its riverfront as former powerplants and industrial centers are turned into office complexes and soccer stadiums.

Rivertown is not an isolated event in Chester’s development but the natural result of decades of urban planning. Therefore, it is critical to have a rigorous framework that can evaluate Rivertown in both the contexts of the development happening in other American
cities and in that of the continued coloniality that exists globally. In the next chapter, this paper will dive into the origins and objectives of Rivertown. It will lay out how it came into existence, in particular examining the policies and cash flows that made it possible and subsequently evaluate the success of it so far.
Part III: Chester

This next section will outline a brief history of Chester and the conditions that led to the creation of Rivertown, emphasizing practices that have carried over into modern Chester and its rich history of resistance. It will then explore the progress and promises of Rivertown over the last two decades and how it has fallen short of its lofty ambitions. There are several key areas of the development process that have a significant impact on the final result and thus must be paid close attention to the legislation that has facilitated Rivertown’s development, the planning and execution process, and how it is financed. The former two components give a strong sense of the decision-making process and who holds power in a community, and the latter is key in understanding what projects are taking priority within a community. On the surface, it is the well-documented story is that of many industrial cities in America, from a bustling blue-collar town to streets lined with boarded-up shops and crumbling houses as the jobs were shipped overseas. But bubbling below this façade is a story less often grappled with, a strategy of corruption, exploitation, and isolation that has reproduced itself across the country and globe. To understand how Rivertown came into existence, the following paragraphs will outline its illustrious rise and the steep decline that followed.
3.1: A Brief History of Chester

Chester was established in 1682 by William Penn as his original settlement in Pennsylvania, and its location along the Delaware River was key in its development as a waterfront industrial center in the first part of the 20th century (Mele 2011, 425). Its signature industry was Sun Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, which produced oil tankers and wartime vessels, and buoyed by a large immigrant and migrant population, it employed around 35,000 people (Mele 2011, 427; 2017, 39). It was also the single largest private employer of African Americans with 15,000 black workers, albeit they were
segregated in a separate yard. (Mele 2017, 39–40). Characterized by the paternalistic, locally based factory owners who were happy to reinvest in the community, Chester became not just the county’s seat, but also a vibrant regional commercial retail and banking district (Petras 1991, 6–7). It was closely integrated with the surrounding region (Petras 1991, 6). A glorified picture of Chester, harkening back to this prosperous time, has been used to help legitimize the necessity for developing Rivertown, but it is important to remember that even in its heyday, Chester was still defined and divided by a racial hierarchy.

During this prosperous period, the seeds were sown for future conflict. To begin with, Chester was subject to a powerful Republican Party machine, led by John McClure, that corrupted local politics and allowed McClure and his cronies to profit from illegally extracting wealth from the city’s assets and giving patronage to communities and unions in exchange for political power (Petras 1991, 12–14). This strategy was particularly effective in black communities because of a sharpened sense of inequality and segregation in the city and a strong desire for equality and representation. The race riots of 1917 and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)-organized labor protests in the 1930s created a dynamic that the McClure machine was able to exploit (Mele 2017, 32, 40–41). By extending favors to black workers yet keeping them dependent on his patronage, McClure was able to mobilize broad and multi-racial support for his party (Petras 1991, 13; Mele 2017, 20, 42), tactics that are still being echoed today. This is an early example of how a white urban regime was able to manufacture consent in Chester. In exchange for a small number of low-wage gig jobs, city officials can garner public support
to divert their funding towards big-ticket development projects with essentially no community benefits.

The end of World War II marked the start of a steep decline in Chester’s fortunes. Like many industrial areas, the industry disappeared, the white population moved to the surrounding suburbs, and racial unrest plagued the city (Mele 2011, 425). The “white flight” was triggered by racial anxieties stoked by the political machine to expand their reach beyond Chester and with promises of new suburban developments and good-paying jobs (Mele 2017, 60–61, 71–72). Interstate 95 and State Route (SR) 291 were constructed in such a way that commuters could bypass Chester while essentially locking residents into a condensed, ghettoized area and geographically fracturing the city (Petras 1991, 21; Mele 2011, 442, 445–46). What remained were low and middle-income black families living on polluted land with few employment opportunities (Mele 2017, 71). This lack of taxable income led the Republican Party to begin skimming profits from wherever they could get them to stay financially viable, which meant first cutting welfare, then healthcare and education (Petras 1991, 20). This rife deprivation leaves Chester vulnerable to neoliberal development, especially private investors in industries that are seen as undesirable in other locations such as waste management plants, landfills, energy plants, refineries, and prisons. Indeed, the state and local government lobbied aggressively to land contracts with companies, often offering tax breaks and relaxing environmental policies to sweeten the deal (Mele 2011, 434). While the local government and private companies profited from this initiative, a profound cost was charged to the community. With some plants built as close as eighty feet from residential areas, Chester’s residents found themselves subject to
substantially higher rates of lung cancer and lead poisoning (Mele 2011, 433–36). This lack of investment created the poisonous narratives that plague Chester today, such as hopeless and decaying. The corruption meant that even when the city officials gained federal funding, it rarely trickled down to the residents (Petras 1991, 22–23), another tradition that has been continued by the modern urban regimes.

A normative shift in environmental justice away from “dirty” industries signaled a new phase in development, one focused on white middle-class consumption and tourism. Peck and Tickell refer to this as the transition from the “roll-back neoliberalism” that characterized the 1980s in a period of federal cutbacks to “roll-out neoliberalism” that is focused on moving beyond industrialization to aggressive market-oriented approaches to draw private investment (Mele 2017, 426; Peck and Tickell 2002). Prisons, casinos, and soccer stadiums followed; all promising jobs and investment in the local economy but seldom delivering (Mele 2011, 437–38). The redevelopment projects of the past forty years have had little to no impact, if not making conditions worse, for Chester’s residents. Yet, despite all this, Chester’s residents have never rolled over. Beginning with the race riots of 1917 and the labor strikes in the 1930s, a tradition of resistance and activism took root in the black community. The polarizing figure of Stanley Branche non-violent protests in Chester during the 1960s Civil Rights movement (Mele 2017, 86–87). He formed the Chester For Freedom Now (CFFN), an organization that advocated direct pressure and more militant tactics than the NAACP was comfortable with (Petras 1991, 11; Mele 2017, 89). This initiative as well as the Greater Chester Movement (GCM) were quickly
corrupted by the funding available for the War on Poverty and became extensions of the political machine, effectively cutting off their grassroots origins (Mele 2017, 107–12).

Still, Elizabeth Petras suggests that “the participation in the popular social movement and the associated ideology of class and race became a part of the memory of place which has been reproduced in recent struggles” (1991, 11). During Chester’s era as a waste magnet, the population was exploited by its first black mayor in making it a white county versus black city issue rather than looking at the environmental impact incinerators would have on the residents (Mele 2017, 124). In 1995, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found “unacceptable health risks” facing Chester’s West End residents, inciting the first real resistance to neoliberal development (Mele 2017, 137). The Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL) was subsequently formed and began protesting the incinerators, ultimately filing a lawsuit citing a violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Mele 2017, 138–39) which signaled the end of waste-based development, and marked the beginning of a new era of tourism and infrastructure-based development.

Today, the legacy of resistance in Chester continues with organizations such as Chester Made, a coalition of artists, advocates, and civil servants that have used art and culture as mediums to chart a revival in Chester (City of Chester 2020a; PHC 2020). The collective action is in direct contrast to development from the outside, with residents utilizing the natural resources and assets of the city to develop from within in the form of expression culture and spatial development (Shabazz 2013, 1239). Their founder, Devon Walls, speaks of owning the physical space in the city as a path for development, and a small arts district
including a café, a gallery, a theater, and an artist workspace has been built in the heart of Chester (Baker 2016). Pennsylvania Humanities Council Executive Director Laurie Zierer cites this as an opportunity to push back against some of the harmful narratives and fear surrounding Chester from the outside community and build a sense of hope from within (Baker 2016). This is a direct contradiction of how urban development is often conceived and can give some insight into how a better future can be realized in Chester.

3.2: The Origins of Rivertown

The end of chasing smokestacks coincided with the beginning of tourism and infrastructure-based development. This trend has happened not only in Chester but in countries across the world. Chester’s development trajectory is strikingly similar to that of Benton Harbor. This new phase of development began in the 1990s after the city’s legal battle with the EPA and the CRCQL over the incinerators and refineries that were devastating to the residents’ health and environment in Chester. Although the existing plants were allowed to continue operations, they were able to ban the construction of any future ones (Mele 2017, 144). Because that was the city’s main cash cow, the city’s government was forced to find new methods of revenue generation.

Both the CRCQL and the local government saw Chester’s waterfront strip as having the potential to transform the city but differed on what that transformation would look like. The CRCQL saw the waterfront as an opportunity to clean up the environment and connect it to the city proper through the addition of recreational spaces and human development facilities (Mele 2017, 144–45). Having just scored a major legal victory, the CRCQL
expected at the bare minimum to have a seat at the table in determining the future trajectory of the city.

City developers and local officials, however, had a diverging opinion on the future of the waterfront. They saw it as an opportunity “to use local market-oriented solutions to boost value and competitiveness” (Mele 2017, 146). This meant the onus was on helping the economy in absolute terms, not necessarily the community or individuals living within it. The city decided to rely on public-private partnerships to facilitate the development of the waterfront, which means public money would be directed at the behest of private companies who by nature are seeking to maximize their investments, a motive that very rarely benefits the community they are operating in (Mele 2017, 146).
Three key pieces of legislation were instantly able to transform the local economy into one that would be attractive to investors. The first was the Keystone Opportunity Zone (KOZ) program, an incentivization tool that states created in 1998 to promote private redevelopment of “underused land” in economically distressed areas (Mele 2017, 147). What it consists of are fairly comprehensive tax cuts for potential investors, including exemptions from school, municipal, and county real estate taxes in addition to tax exemptions on “earned income, net profit, business receipts, sales, wages, and occupancy” over a certain period (DCED 2020; Mele 2017, 147). Autonomy is granted to the investor to develop the site, and while the government hopes to gain an eventual revenue stream from the project, it is fair to ask how much money they are losing by giving these generous tax breaks (Mele 2011, 436). It is also worth noting that the residents get very little say in what happens after the land is bought (Mele 2011, 436). The city, to fast-track this program in Chester, passed the second key piece of legislation, the Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance (LERTA) program. LERTA allowed investors to “defer increases in real estate taxes over ten years” on the KOZs to boost the attractiveness of the land available (Mele 2017, 148). The catch is only underused land in economically distressed areas qualify for this designation, so these KOZs are very much site and even project-specific (Mele 2017, 151). There are more than three hundred KOZs across the state, but the only ones in Delaware County are in Chester, and these are concentrated around the waterfront and on the West End (see Map 3), completely bypassing the city proper (DCED 2020).

In 1995 the city created the Chester Economic Development Authority (CEDA), a group of non-elected officials, business leaders, and non-profit executives that would serve to
manage the community development programs (Mele 2011, 440; 2017, 147; CEDA 2020). They are responsible for overseeing the administration of the KOZ and LERTA programs. They have handled hundreds of millions of dollars in federal and state funding that has gone to supporting and stimulating private investment (Mele 2017, 147; Nakaishi 2016). They have facilitated the development of Rivertown, which thus far includes a casino, a Major League Soccer (MLS) stadium, and the Wharf office complex. But for all this incoming money and construction, very little attention has been paid by CEDA to Chester’s inner city (Mele 2017, 147). As if to underscore the distance from the community, its current president, Drake Nakaishi, is a former health care executive from the West Coast who in 2015 bizarrely got caught opening and operating an unlicensed social lounge with Chester’s chief-of-staff Ron Starr (Staff Reporter 2015; Nakaishi 2020). While CEDA bears Chester’s name, it has very little connection to the residents yet is essentially responsible for determining their economic future.

3.3: Developing the Waterfront

CEDA created a masterplan for the waterfront and named it Rivertown in a move that symbolically and physically represented a break from the city of Chester and its negative reputation (Mele 2017, 143). The first project that took place in Rivertown was renovating the old Philadelphia Electric Company (PECO) power plant into an office complex, today known as the Wharf at Rivertown. It had stood abandoned on polluted land for years, but gained KOZ status in 1999, and was subsequently sold a year later to developers for $1 on the condition the new owners undertook an estimated $50 million clean-up of the surrounding brownfields (Mele 2011, 444; Milford 2001; Swedberg 2007). They did this,
of course, with the financial and organizational help of the EPA and Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP) (US EPA 2016). The Buccini Pollen Group (BPG) purchased the land in 2005 with the intent of developing the rest of the waterfront.

Two major projects were undertaken in the second half of the decade, taking advantage of both the tax incentives and the government’s willingness to direct public funds towards these private ventures. Harrah’s opened a casino in Chester in 2007 and in addition to the KOZ and LERTA programs they were able to gain public funding from several governing branches. The mayor’s office gave $1.1 million in public subsidies, the state approved $2.6 million in grants and loans, and Senator Rick Santorum secured $15 million in federal aid to build a bypass to the casino from SR 322 that conveniently allowed gamblers to avoid driving through downtown Chester (Mele 2017, 150). Around the same time, discussions had begun to bring an MLS stadium to Chester. Keystone Sports and Entertainment, a conglomerate of BPG and other private investors, agreed to design and build an 18,000-seat soccer-specific stadium in Chester contingent on vast public investment (Mele 2017, 151). Again, these investors had little trouble finding public funding, with the county giving them a $30 million bond, $10 million from the Delaware River Port Authority, and $25 million upfront in state aid with an additional $400 million promised later (Mele 2017, 151). The Great Recession in 2008 halted further progress on the waterfront, but city officials hope to eventually complete a second phase of development that calls for “180 townhouses, 225 upscale apartments, 42,000 square feet of retail space, 435,000 square feet of office space, a convention center, greenways, and a marina” (Mele 2011, 446).
Despite the recession, one might reasonably expect that with all this investment there would have been some encouraging signs for Chester’s recovery. With Harrah’s Casino came the specific promise of jobs for local vendors, construction workers, and the community in general (Mele 2011, 443–44). It promised increased traffic to neighboring areas and bring in revenue for the city. State law requires Chester to receive at least $10 million in annual revenue from Harrah’s, which equates to 25% of the city’s entire operating budget, leaving them vulnerable to any changes in the law (Kauffman 2016). Harrah’s, however, benefitted greatly from the tax break schemes in place, saving over $8 million during construction and not even paying property and school taxes until 2014, costing Chester tens of millions of dollars in crucial revenue (Mele 2011, 443; McCrystal 2014). The jobs have not materialized aside from a few low-paying positions and use of a few local vendors (Mele 2011, 443–44). Only a fourth of the construction jobs promised came to fruition, and no new local restaurants have opened near Harrah’s (Mele 2017, 149).

Similarly, with the MLS stadium, reporters have been critical of the lack of growth it has generated for the community over the past decade. Former Mayor John Linder has repeatedly criticized the owners for not doing enough for the city. They pay $150,000 a year in place of taxes but Linder claimed they would need to pay at least $400,000 annually just to pay off the $30M bond that Chester issued them (McCabe 2015). While they have provided over 150 jobs to Chester residents, these are low-wage gig jobs that are only available around 20 days a year during matchdays (McCabe 2015). The team constructed
state of the art training facilities in the lots that were supposed to be filled with apartments and retail centers, which are closed to the public (DeGeorge 2018). Local scholars, politicians, and the current mayor, Thaddeus Kirkland, all agree that the stadium has been a clear disappointment relative to the prosperity and future development it once promised, with Councilman Andy Lewis calling it a “bait and switch” (DeGeorge 2018). The stakes are higher for Chester moving into the next decade with Act 47, a state program that financially supported Chester since 1995, set to expire in 2021, and the state has warned if Chester does not amplify its economic development by then the state will take control of the city (McCabe 2019). This is a dire situation and has been exacerbated by directing funds towards big-ticket development projects that could have been used to address the actual needs of the residents.

Since the Great Recession, investment has mostly dried up, and most of the developments coming from the waterfront have been regarding various plans and promotional materials the city has produced. They still hold analytical value, however, because they offer a guide to what may be in store for Rivertown in the years to come. A few businesses have cropped up along SR 291, including a medical marijuana facility, a beer company, a hotel, and at one point Chester was in the running for the new Amazon Headquarters (Ainsworth 2019a). One of the few investments that has benefitted Chester was the $150 million (albeit primarily publicly funded) conversion of the Kimberly-Clark plant, one of Chester’s oldest employers, from a coal-burning to natural gas facility, reducing the harmful pollution in the neighborhoods around it (Carey 2018). But ultimately, Chester still is plagued by the same problems as before Rivertown was developed. Currently, there is a 20%
unemployment rate in Chester, and while there are 10,000 jobs in Chester, a measly 791 of the city’s residents currently hold them (City of Chester 2020b, 78–81). Instead, unemployment is currently twice the state average, 28 percent of residents live below the poverty line, and incarceration rates have skyrocketed while those not earning a high school diploma has risen to over 30 percent (Mele 2011, 431–32). Their criminal records also exclude these citizens from public benefits, future employment, and voting rights (Caulkins et al. 2005, 24). Poverty levels remain some of the highest in the state, quality education and job training programs have not materialized, and the severe health consequences of living next to power plants and incinerators have not been addressed. As the owner of the Philadelphia Union rightly suggested, a stadium alone cannot fix decades of mismanagement and poverty (McCabe 2015), but perhaps the fault lies in the belief that directing resources towards these neoliberal, large-scale development projects could ever deliver prosperity to the city.
Part IV: Discussion

This chapter will open up a broader discussion on the future of Rivertown as well as some of the actors and proposals that have been adopted. Next, it will examine some of the common tropes and myths surrounding neoliberal development in the American subaltern and attempt to restructure them so that they more closely align with reality. It will then seek to understand how Rivertown’s development informs and is shaped by the theoretical framework described in Part II. Framing Chester’s development strategy in this theoretical context is critical in understanding how Rivertown has come into existence, why it failed, and how that model of development continues to be perpetuated.

4.1: Vision for the Future

In 2012, Chester was once again reimagined and a new vision for the city was set forth. CEDA dubbed this “Vision 2020,” and in a rare moment of candor, acknowledged that “economic development is not only about creating new jobs, building new infrastructure, attracting more business, providing housing, and increasing its tax base, but also includes consideration for a high quality of life for its residents” (CEDA 2012, 11). This shift from purely economic to a more comprehensive development model is similar to that which happened in the 1990s in International Development when a premium was placed on the concept of “sustainable development.” Over the past thirty years, sustainable development
Beyond Rivertown: A New Framework for Chester’s Development

Map 3: Economic Development Map of Chester (CEDA 2012)

has had varied results, and so it is no guarantee that this change in the stated objective will make any difference. Still, it was an important recognition of the need to directly address problems facing the residents and improve the overall quality of their environment, and it merited further investigation of the document to see what concrete steps CEDA was taking to achieve this lofty ambition.

On the first page, CEDA promised “extensive involvement from citizens” (CEDA 2012, 1). They elaborated on this by announcing a steering committee that included residents and community organizations (CEDA 2012, 4), but as usual, the devil is in the details, and this is unfortunately where the collaboration ended. In what was dubbed the “City Beautification” movement, CEDA announced plans to create a “circle of prosperity” in Chester by targeting certain areas for development (CEDA 2012, 11). Unfortunately, these
were largely isolated in Rivertown and the Central Business District (CBD) area (CEDA 2012, 23–24). *Map 4* illustrates the fractured, “doughnut-shaped” neoliberal development, and Vision 2020 will only serve to further economically and physically separate the rest of the city from Rivertown and the CBD by only directing resources towards areas that are designed with generally white, middle-class visitors and professionals in mind (Mele 2011, 442; Peck and Tickell 2002, 394–95).

The specific implementation targets’ language varies greatly when distinguishing between projects that can help the residents versus when it is speaking about private-public partnerships. It states that targets in Planning Districts 3 and 4 include “supporting docking concept for improved water recreation access, develop an entertainment-oriented commercial zone, and attract 21st-century high rise/signature buildings for corporate headquarters” (CEDA 2012). The language surrounding community revitalization, however, includes much softer language, including in the same districts to “encourage mixed-use development for Rivertown, educate the community on water conservation, and remain abreast of grassroots organizations” (CEDA 2012). There is no sign that community needs are specifically being addressed outside of a few neighborhood beautifications schemes and hiking trails. The only time the residents or community organizations are even directly involved in the implementation of these development goals is limited to these token, low-budget improvements that may only serve to drive property and rent values up. Compared to a 1965 development plan that was never properly funded but proposed blue-collar jobs on the waterfront, housing upgrades, and locally-based CBD revitalization (Mele 2011, 431), Vision 2020 shows little ability to provide the residents of Chester with
Beyond Rivertown: A New Framework for Chester’s Development

anything that will substantively improve their quality of life in the manner in which it promises to.

Further evidence of this is clear in what CEDA has been doing since publishing Vision 2020. One of their few materials published since is a brochure advertising Chester, and in particular Rivertown, to potential investors, highlighting the numerous tax break schemes and a “highly skilled and educated labor force in the surrounding area” (CEDA 2019), which is a nod towards the affluent Main Line. Last year, an architectural firm from Boston, NBBJ, was hired to develop the remainder of Rivertown, and they answer only to CEDA, Keystone Sports and Entertainment, and the Riverfront Alliance, which is an exclusive board of white managerial executives at partner companies in the area that is essentially tasked with finding private companies and individuals to invest in Rivertown (Ainsworth 2019b; RADC 2020). NBBJ’s urban design director, Kathryn Firth, visited Chester and stated their goal is to create a year-round tourist presence, commenting that “people don’t feel safe in a place that doesn’t have a population” (Ainsworth 2019b). What that means, of course, is a place without a suburban, white, middle-class population, a signal if any was needed that Rivertown would not a project intended for the residents of Chester. Once again, Chester’s residents and organizations like Chester Made find themselves on the outside looking in of these power relationships, and CEDA’s commitment to community participation is liminal at best. With Act 47 set to expire soon, and with the Philadelphia Union looking at a potential downtown relocation, the clock is ticking for Chester. It seems foolish at best to believe the same tired old playbook of economic development will work when it has failed over the past two decades.
4.2: Myths of Development

The reason that neoliberal development continues to be done in this manner has a lot to do with the language and the beliefs that are widespread in development. Rivertown, and the neoliberal projects before it, constructed their legitimacy in these beliefs, otherwise, it would make little sense to improve a community’s well-being by directing community resources towards poisonous incinerators, casinos, and stadiums before it has even provided quality education and employment, clean water, a supermarket, and upgraded housing. Throughout this critique, this paper will utilize the theoretical framework explored in Part II to help substantiate these claims and link them to broader phenomena.

One of the most pervasive myths in neoliberal development is the construction of a narrative of “winners” and “losers.” The winner of these big-ticket projects is often portrayed to be the city as a whole, as the city not only gains a revenue stream but countless employment opportunities and a “spillover” effect that will benefit surrounding businesses (Mele 2017, 6, 148). This narrative erases the fact that the KOZs mean that the city will not see revenue for years, and the jobs offered are largely unattainable because Chester’s residents lacked the skills and training to compete in the job market (Mele 2017, 148–52). Maybe a spillover effect is possible, but certainly not when separate exit ramps from the main highway that expressly avoided downtown, Chester. The fact that no new restaurants have opened up near the stadium or casino is indicative that this spillover effect is pure fantasy. Ultimately, the only winners are the private investors who recoup their low initial investments quickly, and the black urban regime who is given credit for bringing business to Chester and can thus obscure the public eye away from the unseemly parts of their city.
continuing to be plagued by crime and poverty and instead towards its new, shiny, symbolic markers of progress.

In this narrative, the “losers,” on the other hand, are the unfortunate individuals who for whatever reason are unable to take advantage of the new opportunity given to them (Mele 2017). In the post-racial, laissez-faire atmosphere created by neoliberal development, it is impossible to blame long-term racial and economic oppression, and the fault is instead laid at the feet of individuals (Mele 2017, 6–7). They are constructed as too lazy to take advantage of the opportunity presented to them, a racialized trope that has been weaponized for decades to argue for cuts to welfare and funding to the American subaltern (Mele 2017, 7, 154). By removing current inequality from their “historical rootedness and structural causes,” the urban regime “negates the legitimacy of collective action among black residents at a community level because they no longer qualify as stakeholders in community development” (Mele 2017, 154–55). Finally, because some find low-wage work in these projects, a dichotomy is created between those who are willing to work hard and those standing in the way of the “new Chester,” paving the way for a larger police presence to ensure that they do not tip the apple cart while simultaneously discouraging residents to engage with the new spaces (Mele 2017, 155). This is an important example of how the colonial matrix of power works in the American subaltern. Much like colonial times, a racialized division of labor exists in the name of bringing “development” to the “barbarians,” in this case Chester’s residents. This apparatus includes control is not just an economic sense, but also through tight policing and control of the subjective narrative that can be used to explain to take credit for any success while appropriating the blame at the
residents’ feet without considering any of the mitigating factors that the urban regime has done nothing to address.

The mythology of winners and losers is closely tied to the neoliberal assertion that the pro-growth free market is the only solution to social issues and plans like Rivertown are thus often described as the last opportunity or best opportunity to develop (Mele 2017, 6, 149). Increased diversity is seen as a byproduct of this economic growth, although a clear distinction remains between the middle-class, majority-white tourist population and that of the majority black and Latino low-wage gig workers. The chance to achieve respectability in the eyes of its suburban neighbors is prioritized by the city before investing in its population and its local businesses and landowners. Resident participation and self-determination are relegated to a “collateral casualty of consumerism” (Mele 2017, 156). The recklessly backward logic of the city being able to find $87 million for a stadium but having no money to invest in a supermarket speaks volumes of what is happening in Chester and with Rivertown (Mele 2017, 152–56). Just as Seamster (2016) notes in Benton Harbor, Michigan, the black and white urban regimes have collaborated to create an extraction machine in Chester, directing public resources towards dispossessing its population of valuable land and assets. Instead of the government working in the interests of its population, it is dependent on furthering those of private investors and corporations.

This brings us to the final myth, which claims Rivertown is even a development project for Chester. Sure, it uses Chester’s funding and land, but ultimately, it marks the enactment of “spatially uneven development,” or as Mele describes, “islands of renewal in a sea of
Beyond Rivertown: A New Framework for Chester’s Development

decay” (Mele 2017, 146). The KOZs created the opportunity for some parts of Chester to experience revitalization based on their economic utility. This facilitates the fragmented and exclusionary development that Rivertown represents for Chester’s residents (Mele 2017, 151). These “sublocal fiscal enclaves” are disconnected and even protected from Chester proper, with tactics such as multilane highways and increased police activity employed to discourage residents from taking advantage of the renewed space (Weber 2002, 533; Mele 2011, 442). The city maintains that they are mixed-use facilities and open to all, but residents who are scraping by rarely have costly casino visits, soccer matches, or, in the case of Benton Harbor, high-end golfing accounted into their budgets. This paradoxical reality is part and parcel of the neoliberal project which harkens back to a colonial theme of wealth and poverty existing in such proximity to each other.

To be clear, there is nothing legally wrong with Rivertown, but there is a question of intent and morality when public funds are being directed to projects which promise development but show almost no potential to generate it. From one project to the next in Chester, development has failed spectacularly considering the funding poured into on the local, state, federal, and private levels. What is needed is a dramatic reimagining of what is possible in developing the American subaltern. This paper will argue in the concluding chapter to achieve transformational development, money, and power for development need to be put in the hands of those who have the most at stake, Chester’s residents.
4.3: Applying the Theoretical Framework

In this final section, this thesis will explicitly use the theoretical framework provided in Part II and apply it in the context of Rivertown. By looking at the different models and their relevance to Rivertown, this thesis hopes to provide a framework that can be analytically useful in other cities in the American subaltern. Firstly, Mignolo’s four questions of decolonial thinking will be considered to understand Chester using border thinking. As a refresher, the four questions are:

1. Who is the knowing subject and what is his/her material apparatus of enunciation?
2. What kind of knowledge/understanding is he/she engaged in generating, and why?
3. Who is benefitting or taking advantage of such-and-such knowledge or understanding?
4. What institutions (universities, media, foundations, government, corporations) are supporting and encouraging such and such knowledge and understanding. (Mignolo 2011, 188–89)

The knowing subject in this instance is the urban regime that includes CEDA, Harrah’s, Keystone Sports, and Delaware County, and the material apparatus becomes Rivertown. They are the ones who claim to be the experts and can manufacture consent through their shared commitment to solely focusing on economic development. They are engaged in generating knowledge that equates private investment with public prosperity because it benefits both investors and the city’s bottom line. The people who are taking advantage include the local mayor and city officials, who look good for attracting investment, CEDA, who can sustain its power and authority over these projects, and private investors, who can make huge profits from the devalued land and tax cuts. The institutions that support and encourage this knowledge include the local government who sells an image of prosperity to its citizens even though they are only being thrown scraps by the developers, the county and state government that incentivizes the local government to accept this development
model through huge grants and subsidies, and corporate and institutional leaders who are unwilling to consider bold new methods of development and continue to argue that economic stimulation is the only path forward.

As referenced earlier in this chapter, colonial discourse still has a living legacy in Chester. The idea that the residents of Chester need development brought to them is a disservice to the potential that they hold, and harkens back to a colonizer bringing civilization, capitalism, or democracy to communities in the Global South. By ignoring their agency and ability to shape their future, the urban regime can manufacture consent to these huge publicly funded projects. It creates the illusion economic development is the only choice and uses racialized tropes to explain why residents of Chester have failed to benefit when in fact there are sever mitigating circumstances that were never addressed by Rivertown such as high levels of lead and pollution, a crumbling education system, a punitive policing and incarceration apparatus, and a severe lack of training to be competitive in the employment market. The colonial legacy has been extended into Chester, like it still is today in the Global South, to explain the lack of development and normalize the extraction of resources from the community.

The white urban regime in Chester consists of the state and county governments, corporations such as Harrah’s and Keystone Sports and Entertainment, and elite organizations such as CEDA and the Riverfront Alliance. It can coerce the local government through the promise of large subsidies and local employment to sign off and convince the residents that a project like Rivertown will bring genuine benefits to the
community. Having the local government on board cements the legitimacy of this urban regime, and despite excluding residents, local non-profits, and businesses from the conversation, they can create the illusion of public and private interests being aligned in the pursuit of a soccer stadium or a casino.

Finally, the extraction machine is the ultimate goal of Rivertown. Keystone Sports and Entertainment now own the valuable land on the Delaware River, and if the Philadelphia Union relocates downtown then Chester will be left paying for an empty stadium and lose the few jobs that it provides. The dispossession of this land is a critical component and the reason d’être for the urban regime as they are driven by the goal of maximizing their profits. The failure of Rivertown to deliver community benefits has paradoxically justified more development of the same nature. It is particularly troubling that the dispossession is subsidized using public funding, but this has become a common experience not only in Chester but across the American subaltern.
Part V: Conclusions

This thesis has argued that Rivertown has failed to meet expectations because it is part of a broader neoliberal development system that privileges corporate and wealthy interests while in the development process and does not directly address the needs of the community. This development model continues to be perpetuated due to a powerful urban regime that can extract resources from vulnerable communities while using the normative rhetoric of economic progress to justify their extraction. The extraction machine model is on full display as hundreds of millions in public funds and tax breaks have been funneled into Rivertown over the past twenty years, and while the residents of Chester have gained little value from these projects, the private investors, corporate partners, and local government have all benefitted. The complicity and predatory practices of the urban regime, both black and white, have created conditions of coloniality in Chester that were once thought to be exclusive to the Global South. A racialized division of labor, a tightly policed city, an extractive economic model, and control of the “objective” narrative are all central themes of the colonial empire, reconstructed in the American subaltern. Neoliberalism has become the latest incarnation of a “civilizing force” for the colonial project and dominates the urban development space despite producing some disastrous results for the populations it claims to help. What is needed to achieve progress in Chester and the American subaltern is a radical reimagining of the very concept of development, and border thinking and relying on those who are a part of the lived experience in Chester would be a good place to start.
A direct connection can be made between Chester and Benton Harbor. Both are former industrial waterfronts that have had similar processes of devaluation and then high-end tourist-centered development using mostly public funding. Both cities have left their residents high and dry, with exceptionally high crime and poverty rates continuing to plague the communities these shiny new developments are a part of. Both Chester and Benton Harbor are majority-black urban centers, and with many more like them across the country, this research and theoretical framework certainly has relevance beyond just Chester. Further research to develop a better understanding of the shared experiences across the American subaltern would certainly help to highlight how these methods of corruption and extraction have been reproduced throughout the nation. Future research could also include an analysis of this theoretical framework vis-à-vis a city in the Global South to help investigate the crosshairs of the legacy of the colonial model and the reality of the neoliberal development model. Finally, a new model of development that is directed and led by the community themselves with the appropriate political and economic capital to effectively pursue their objectives should be trialed to observe whether it can create a stronger return on investment than ceding authority to corporate investors. Economic growth would still certainly be possible in this new model, but by putting the human development first, it carries the potential for a much more sustainable and prosperous future in Chester.
Bibliography


