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Innately American, Black America’s Inheritance:

A Rhetorical Analysis of Black Death & Identity

A Thesis by

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Orange, CA

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2022

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May 2022
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For Freddie Gray and Korryn Gaines. May their names never leave our history.

To the writers whose shoulders I stand upon, and the many Black lives lost to violence.

To the many people who came before me: my ancestors.

To the city that inspired this thesis- Baltimore will forever be in my heart, even when not in my present. This city birthed me and molded me to be the writer I am today.

To my parents, Maiketa J. Holmes and Timothy L. Jennings jr. Two young people who just wanted better. Through me, you have done better.

To my dear friend, India D. Nance. Thank you for the long hours of listening to me read, write, and shed tears during the crafting of my thesis.

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To Latana E. Makell, who never had the chance to write her thesis. Rest in love. Rest in power, 1982-2001.
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS


ABSTRACT

*Innately American, Black America’s Inheritance:*

A Rhetorical Analysis of Black Death & Identity

by Montéz T. L. Jennings

In 2015, Baltimore city erupted after the death of Freddie Carlos Gray. He was a 25-year-old who was forcibly placed into the back of a police van and after riding in the van, sustained several injuries that resulted in his death. After the video footage was shown to the public, a tension bubbled in the air that caused what seemed like weeklong protests and riots. The event is now referred to as the “Baltimore Uprising.” When he died, it was like a portion of each of us died. It was another narrative added to the cultural collective of Black faces killed by police violence. I was a year from graduating undergrad when Freddie Gray was killed. I remember distinctly, the feeling in the air. There was a thickness. A sense of doom lurked in the air. This feeling has stayed with me for years after his death. The thickness, the heaviness of his death and the causes behind it are what interest me. The relationship between Black people in America and police has been tumultuous, gruesome, and counterproductive to progress of communities. Black identity and the Black body have been controversial since the creation of this identity. Blackness, identity, and policing and their connectedness is the reason behind this thesis. The relationship between Black identity and the continued attack on the presence of Blackness in America is a catalyst for this thesis, in which I explore the complexities and beauty of identity through an examination of the life and death of Freddie Gray. I explore how identity is linked throughout communities and the influence it has on both people and history. This thesis is important for me because of my identity.
I am a Black woman from West Baltimore who grow up witnessing and experiencing Black Baltimore. To fully analyze my identity, the uprising, and its relation to the city, I collected sources from scholarly texts and conducted interviews from organizers and protestors who were present during the uprising, alongside my own perspective, and I use these varied sources to show how Freddie Gray’s life and death are emblematic of Black American identity.
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Introduction

My house in Baltimore was only a few blocks away from the home of Freddie Gray, Gilmor homes. Freddie Carlos Gray was a 25-year-old Black man who was murdered by police in 2015. Gilmor Homes has been around since the 1940s. Its bleak brick walls and rusty clothes lines have become synonymous with the troubles of West Baltimore. The city has several housing projects that enclose mostly Black people. Many of these settlements are surrounded by police stations, jails, and low budget liquor stores. It’s not a secret or a flaw in design that these police stations were placed in areas with public housing. It is almost a question of the chicken and the egg- which was intended first in the design? The buildings lack funding and are often associated with drug sales and drug abuse. However, this is home for many. This is the background for many people, and it is a part of the city.

Gilmor homes becomes very important in the story of Freddie Gray and Baltimore. After the death of Gray, it would almost become a living character and witness to the experiences of those Black Baltimoreans living there. Gilmor holds the secrets of brutality and is representative of the side effects of the continued racism. Gilmor is less than a ten-minute walk away from the rowhome where I spent my time in high school and undergrad. This means it is only a few blocks from where he was arrested and ultimately where he spent the last moments of a full life. I was still in Baltimore in 2015 when his death struck the city deeply. His death was a stitch busting on a wound. The city exploded when Freddie died because we are a city full of desperate, destitute people. The protesting and later rioting, referred to as “The Uprising,” created a cultural shift. The involvement of several communities and the tension in the entire city created a new facet of Baltimore. The Uprising changed the city in many ways, including putting new perspectives on
the city. New organizations and initiatives came out of The Uprising. This rooted to the death of a man known around the city. This became so important because Gray represented an aspect of all of us in the city.

When he died, it was like a portion of each of us died. It was another narrative added to the cultural collective of Black faces killed by police violence. I was a year from graduating undergrad when Freddie Gray was killed. The local news reported him being apprehended but also replayed the loop of him being dragged into a police van. It was in this moment Gray’s humanity was lost to many things that would become muddled at the case progressed. Gray was stolen by the police superiority rooted in white supremacy that allows a false sense of authority. Police have used their badge to place themselves above the citizens of communities they patrol, especially communities with Black and Brown people. Even our people in our very own communities have given them an almost God like status that absolves them from accountability. The “Blue life” that a person who calls themself an officer aligns themselves with becomes their personality, not just a livelihood. We are told to respect and fear police because they are police. It is mostly because they have weapons, most are white, and there is in an indoctrination into the profession. Freddie Gray’s death added fuel to this machine. I don’t want to trivialize his death but all these Black deaths seem to be playing into a cat and mouse game that gives police a sense of pride. Death and execution are related to control. Police are not here to protect; they are here to control. Gray becomes a figure in the history of Baltimore, alongside Tyrone West, a figure that would become a symbol for progress and inspiration for things to happen. Yet we look at the city and the root causes of Gray’s death or even the crimes of the past haven’t been addressed properly. Freddie Gray was a human being who was murdered for existing. Somehow this seems to be a trend in Baltimore, being murdered for existing.
Gray’s humanity stripped with every replay of him being put into the police van as well as the release of photos of him in hospital bed. The tension. The anger. The outrage. I remember distinctly, the feeling in the air. There was a thickness. A sense of doom lurked in the air. This feeling has stayed with me for years after his death. A year later not far from Baltimore in Randallstown, a 23-year-old woman named Korryn Gaines would be killed and her son shot by police. Gaines’ case created a discourse that would expose the disparities in the deaths of Black women compared to the death of Black men. There is gender inequity when speaking of how violence effects people who are not Black men. Black women’s deaths are not the catalyst for conversations about police reform. We are an add on or an aside. Gaines makes me think of the plight of the Black woman.

The thickness, the heaviness of Black death and the causes behind it are what interest me. The relationship between Black people in America and police has been tumultuous, gruesome, and counterproductive to progress of communities. The Black identity and the Black body have been controversial since the creation of the identity. When speaking of “the creation of identity,” I am referencing generations removed from Africa who created Black American customs as we know them. After the arrival of Africans and after being enslaved on various plantations, families were separated to further cause disruption. The disruption contributed to the chaos of being misplaced and disconnected from the self. In “Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming,” Ben L. Martin writes,

Declining the African American label, Phillip Gay argues that the descendants of Africans brought to the United States have long since created a unique culture virtually unrelated to Africa. Its elements include: "a distinctly Black American cuisine of low-cost edibles more indigenous to Europe and the New World than to Africa, a distinctly Black
American patois firmly rooted in the English language, relatively distinct Black American patterns of familial organization and ... religious practices grounded in Christianity, a non-African religion." Gay observes that "the overwhelming majority of black Americans are at least six or seven generations culturally removed from Africa.” (89).

In Martin’s writings, the concept of Black American heritage in relation to African ancestry is in both speculation and doubtlessness. The identity is rooted in the basis of Martin’s article. The question of our ancestry and who we once were are very distant yet familiar to our being.

Blackness, identity, and policing and their connectedness is the reason behind this thesis. History and language have influenced the violence enacted upon Black people. This may seem like an obvious fact; however, American history has been intricately constructed to create the other, the border, and the distinctions that are hierarchies we currently uphold. These hierarchies have bled into ways in which we categorize our own community. (For example, frowning upon those who live in public housing like Gilmor homes). The relationship between Black identity and the continued attack on the presence of Blackness in America is a catalyst for this thesis. I want to explore the complexities and beauty of identity. I am looking to explore how identity is linked throughout communities and the influence it has on people. Black Americans have a particularly unique position in America. Being Black in America is almost like an unsolved mystery or paradox of identity. Our ancestors were brought here not as Americans or settlers. Generations grew to be American, to be Black. Our ancestors crafted this identity for their current descendants. We are American but not entirely. We have culture that was stripped from our ancestors that continues to be stripped from us. In the identity of being Black, we are connected to ghosts and fragments of the “once before.” We search for our own blank canvases, our own pictures that would be our true
history and connection to ourselves. There is a longing to discover something lost or maybe even acquire something we never had.

I often think back to Freddie Gray because he was so close but so unfamiliar until his death. Everyone in the city knew who he was when he died. The entire city was reshaped and stunted. Although, we knew it was coming, it was still a shock. It happened in Ferguson and years ago it happened to a man named Tyrone West. I knew something else or someone else would happen in Baltimore. It was unnerving but it was a clear example of what it means to be Black in America. To be poor, to be innovative, to survive, and to be in a constant state of fear. Freddie Gray and I are from the same zip code. The same area. The two of us are examples of what life can be like in Baltimore. Both going through public schools and existing in the city. It’s a hard city but it’s a beautiful, culturally rich city. Baltimore is a predominantly Black place that is over policed, and this is what interest me. The impact of policing and death on our city. But more importantly, the effect of Blackness on American cities. Cities full of Black citizens are most often full of poverty, have poor education systems, and an influx of police. With the development of American cities came the integration of society. Black became present in many areas. Throughout the timeline of America, the history of Blackness has also been a history of violence and racism. It’s unfortunate that it it’s also a part of American Blackness. There is no way to avoid the reality that to be Black American is to be innately American. We are a part of the American fabric yet from the moment we have been here, we have been treated as an “other.” To be Black is to never have home field advantage wherever you are.

This thesis is important for me because of my identity. In addition to exploring identity, I am questioning how violence and history influence Black identity and Black death. The thesis pulls from rhetorical resources and ideas to contemplate and complete the answer to these
questions. I am a Black woman from West Baltimore who grow up witnessing and experiencing Black Baltimore. I was born and raised in Baltimore, born in John Hopkins’ hospital. I spent much of my young life in East Baltimore until my family and I made the move to West Baltimore. Much of my life in Baltimore was spent being overly cautious or buried in books. I often felt like a bystander in my own city. I was absorbing and processing culture in many ways. To fully analyze my identity, the uprising, and its relation to the city, I conducted interviews from organizers and protestors who were present during the uprising, alongside my own perspective. I want to be able to move through the different facets of Baltimore and how that is a part of the bigger narrative of identity. I interviewed both directors of Organizing Black (Michaela Duchess Brown, Ralikh Hayes), a former activist/organizer (David Blair), two “artivists” (Terrence “Duke” Porter, Justin Whye), students present during the uprising (Destini Harris, Takiyah Mayo) and a protestor (India Nance). These perspectives gave me the insight I needed about Black identity, police brutality, and the direction of Baltimore city because Baltimore reflects every poor Black American city.
Two Baltimores

Charm city. The city that reads. Bodymore, Murderland. The city of firsts. The city on the water. The other names that Baltimore holds. Baltimore is a city of culture curated by Black people. There are in fact two different Baltimores, with a rather specific type of persons. Former advocacy leader of New Lens, David Blair says,

“I don't think they are mutually exclusive because, you know, you got Black Baltimoreans and then you have everybody else. And within black the black Baltimore culture is like its own separate thing. So, it's like we can relate to all of the other Baltimore, Maryland, little epithets and things that they have going on. Like we can relate to that. But even in our own little subset of being black Baltimoreans, we still have our own, like we say, ‘lor’ and ‘dummy’ and ‘whore.’ And other people can't relate to that because they don't get it. Like I remember, I called one of my coworkers a whore on accident and he thought I was insulting him. And I'm like, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. It's not an insult. It's fine. My bad. I forgot you are not from Baltimore, so you don't get it. But like once I waited ‘till he was cool about it. So, you know, I think it is like it is something special to be a Black Baltimorean, but I don't think by being black and Baltimorean are mutually exclusive.”

There is a charm to our language and mannerisms. Through our economic turmoil and deprivation in many ways, we have things that resonate with Black Baltimoreans. Alongside our joy, we have a painful history influenced by many shifts in the greater events of the world.
Baltimore is known as a dangerous, drug filled city. These claims happened when crack hit Baltimore, much like many other cities in Baltimore. The crack epidemic swept through Baltimore streets like tides washing ashore. Neighborhoods destroyed and depleted because of drug that was able to be described as criminal and therefore able to criminalize an entire group of people. Generations of children living and seeing the lives of relatives and culture change completely. Imagine, a childlike Freddie Gray, born in 1989. I came along in 1994. The idea of a “junkie” became a permanent fixture in our culture. The dancing, leaning, moaning, spastic body movements are all everyday normalcies in our community. The hangouts for the “junkies” are commonly known places in Black Baltimore. Children of the crack epidemic and children who grew up in the crack epidemic. Children on the tail end of the epidemic who were born into the culture of junkies and drug needles readily available. I remember seeing my first heroine needle in a sandbox in elementary school. I had no idea what it even was. I do know that it was filled with brown blood. It was buried perfectly in the corner in which my fingers happen to graze. When I describe the “thing” to my mother, she was horrified. The color drained from her face as she had to explain to a first grader what needles outside of the doctor’s office were used for. I would later find that my mother had experienced the side effects of the destruction of drugs. Her uncle was a drug addict who hid drugs in his basement room. Three different generations now tarnished by the drug epidemic swept into our communities. I think back to Freddie Gray, who was a product of Baltimore. Someone who grew within a drug filled city. Someone who fell into selling drugs, eventually punished for drugs, and that punishment followed him through his life. A punishment that allowed for Gray to become the antagonist in the media. A lifestyle that was placed upon Gray and ultimately played a part in his death.
On April 20, 2021, Nancy Pelosi thanked George Floyd. According to USA Today, she said, “Thank you, George Floyd, for sacrificing your life for justice. For being there to call out to your mom — how heartbreaking was that — call out for your mom, 'I can't breathe,” she followed up with, “will always be synonymous with justice” (Behrmann). Pelosi willingly stood at a podium in a red suit with some sort of gold brooch, proudly announcing that Mr. Floyd had willingly laid his life on the line for America’s fight for justice. Soldiers going to a war that they didn’t know they were fighting. Pelosi was sadly mistaken and is a clear example of oblivious elected officials speaking unknowingly about Black issues. This picture not unfamiliar to many Black residents of cities just like Baltimore.

Pelosi and I share roots in the same city. She was born in Baltimore to a father who served as mayor of Baltimore from 1947-1959. He was responsible for erecting confederate memorials around the city. In addition, her brother also served as mayor of Baltimore from 1967-1971. She has been surrounded by politics her entire life and went into politics. Yet somehow, with all the world that she has observed and debated bills about, Pelosi still managed to diminish George Floyd to a social justice icon who plotted his own course and made the decision to die. In that moment, Pelosi contributed to the dehumanization of George Floyd. In a way, Pelosi followed in the footsteps of her father and erected her own commemorative statue of George Floyd. A symbol created with the white gaze in mind. In Pelosi’s mind, Floyd is a reminder of justice, yet he is really a reminder of the consequence of being Black and assumed guilty. This is a representation of many white liberals in Baltimore. At times, living in this city is like living in two villages with two completely different cultures. Let me explain.

Baltimore is a divided city and has been divided since the early 1900s. We are a city with many firsts, including, the first to red line our city and create zoning for Black and white people.
The zip codes explain the intricacies and meticulous division of the city. Because of this, Baltimore has Black Baltimore—neighborhoods in which Black people are born, raised, and congregate. It is a place where the rev of a dirt bike rides through the street brazenly. The smell of salt, pepper, and ketchup lingering in the air as the summer air breaks. Houses condemned by the city and decorated with boards that have been gnawed or ripped. It is the home of the genre called “club music.” It is crabs on the porch in the summer. Barbeques that attract neighbors. Makeshift snowball stands and mom & pop shops on almost every corner. It is gunshots. It is memorials on street corners with t-shirts tied to light posts. It is the fear of police as they circle the block like vultures. We are the heartbeat of the city. We are its lifeline. Without us, Baltimore wouldn’t be the Baltimore we know.

Then there is Nancy Pelosi’s Baltimore: white Baltimore. These areas of the city where white people have migrated. These are pockets of gentrification. Swanky bars. Historical plaques and monuments. Regular recycling and trash pick-up. This is where cobblestone exist, the only commemoration of slavery left in the city that gets covered in vomit every Friday and Saturday night. The bile covers the sidewalks like history tries to cover the remnants of slavery in our modern, progressive state. It makes it easy to believe that slavery never happened here.

White Baltimore is the diminishing “hon” Hampden made so popular by John Waters’ films. There was once a time when people thought of the Baltimore accent, they thought of this cadence. People saying, “Bawlmere,” or elongating the o when saying “Orioles” or “Natty Boh.” The places by the water-Canton, Harbor East, and Fells point. The atmosphere changes as you maneuver from one pocket of the city to the other. White Baltimore has tried to make itself the default of culture, extracting more from the people who have been deeply rooted in the city and expanded its reach. Most of East Baltimore has been taken by Johns Hopkins’ hospital for various
purposes. Black people are getting pushed more and more into small crevices of the city. Essentially, Black Baltimoreans are pushed into slums created by white expansion. White Baltimore is slowly becoming Baltimore. With Black people being easily accessible in one place, policing becomes easier, underfunding becomes easier and among other things, creating a food desert becomes easier. Killing Black people becomes easier and second nature when they are all in one place.

Crime, murder, and violence are like three unwanted children circulating Black neighborhoods. We are murdered by police and commit violent crimes against each other. The issue is not the false narrative of “Black on Black crime,” but more a side effect of depleting Black Baltimore. From crack pillaging the neighborhoods to gun violence, our “urban decay,” has been a source of contention and hostility. Historic homes with grand, authentic marble steps going to waste. Small Black business destroyed and neighborhoods like Pennsylvania Avenue which were once the epicenter for Black economics, arts, and culture died due to disinvestment because of racial insensitivity. (Although, through the work of artists and community planners in 2019, Pennsylvania Avenue became the Black Arts and Entertainment District\(^1\). The hope is that the area can be revitalized, and interest will resume in the area).

When white supremacy deems something invaluable, entire cultures can crumble. In Baltimore, Black Baltimore specifically is where the lady sang the blues and Cab Calloway\(^2\) kicked off his career. These moments in history once preserved by location are now slipping from the fingertips of a community. We want to somehow preserve the city while also stripping its roots. We want history to prevail while somehow pushing its descendants to the brink of extinction. We

\(^{1}\) BAD

\(^{2}\) Calloway spent his childhood in Baltimore. One of his homes was demolished in Old West Baltimore.
want to change the city to make it more palatable for tourists, particularly tourists who are not Black. Tourism isn’t the problem, but vilifying Blackness has become a mammoth and silent cause for concern in Baltimore. More and places where Black people once went for comradery and fellowship have closed.

The difference between Black people and white people in Baltimore is hidden in restaurants, common areas, and simply neighborhoods. The duality that exists within preservation and ruin, liberalism, and prejudice, corrodes the city with the idea that Baltimore is “developing.” White Baltimore is developing while Black Baltimore is receding.
Policing in Baltimore

The police force was created in 1784 in which constables were given power to govern the peace of the people (msa). Since its creation, the police force has yet to be inviting or friendly to Black people. The idea to protect or govern peace is not a courtesy passed to Black people. The Baltimore Sun released an article in 2019 describing the long history of tension between police and Black Baltimore residents. James Cabezas writes, “Through all levels of the Baltimore Police Department, from members of command staff down to officers on the street, the Department has not implemented fundamental principles of community policing.” This “us versus them” culture between the BPD and the city’s African American communities is hardly new, however. It has existed for more than half a century. This article was written by a former police officer. Cabezas details his experience firsthand witnessing corruption and abuse of privilege. He goes on to say, “In 1964, police officers terrorized African American residents in more than 200 homes with illegal searches for the notorious Veney brothers, who wounded one officer and killed another after a Christmas Eve liquor store holdup. Cops dubbed their searches “Superman Warrants” because they broke down doors using their shoulders — like Superman — instead of obtaining court ordered search warrants.” The former officer describes illegal activities from BPD and racist epithets used by other officers. The legacy of BPD spreads like osmosis through the community, so much so that we learned distain of police. We learn to look as perfect as possible to avoid encounters with police. We don’t fear police, we are greatly afraid of public death and a premature demise caused by a force backed by a greater system. We watched Freddie Gray live what would be his last moments publicly humiliated. Gray became another symbol from authority that we do not belong and should not be comfortable even in our own communities. The poet, spoken word artist, author and self-proclaimed “artivist,” Terrance “Duke” Porter speaks on Black
bodies and the collective mind of Blackness especially in relation to Black tragedy. When reflecting on police, Duke laments, “police officers have really embraced this cognitive dissonance, that they not be, that they need to be held accountable. Like they believe this is the one job in the world that… of course that part of their laws, qualified immunity. That law came up because there was already a belief that doing this kind of work, you should not be held accountable in any kind of way.” Police officers have become almost like mythical heroic figures who can do no wrong because everything they do is somehow for the great functioning of our society. Somehow, Freddie Gray became a foe in a fairytale. Like many Black people in what becomes fablelike stories of death (fablelike in the characteristics of a cautionary tale or lesson to be told. Black death is something to be learned from. If one would comply, not run, or even “respect authority” then these occurrences wouldn’t happen. If one does better for themselves in some way, these things wouldn’t happen. Although these are false statements, the murders of Black people usually come with some sort of “dos and don’ts” afterwards). Freddie Gray becomes the villain disturbing whiteness, and therefore needs to be stopped by the forces of whiteness. The police have created a public persona of corruption and nobility, two competing narratives. A narrative that tells the public that police are our heroes while they lurk in neighborhoods awaiting chaos. The country is not less chaotic with policing. Policing contributes to the chaos. These narratives serve the America that the police exist within.

Five years after the murder of Gray, his home and site of arrest is being demolished. (Campbell). The murals dedicated to him will be destroyed. The physical reminder of his murder will be gone. Although the area will still have a heavy police presence. Ralikh Hayes who is a community organizer and an executive director to the grassroots organization, Organizing Black says,
So, like the history of Baltimore, in 10 years, Gilmor Homes will be gone. And so, and then and the Baltimore uprising will be 15 years old, there will literally be individuals who have been born that like may not actually hear about it. Part of having a community is like understanding that like a memory can live on. Particularly understanding that it's a, you know, income-based community. And that people families live in those, you know, some of those homes for generations.

It is another form of erasure that solidifies the point that Black people, Black bodies are expendable. Ourselves and our histories can easily be replaced with prettier buildings and other initiatives from the city that don’t serve us. The creation of a community born from inequity will be erased. Not only will the familiar structure of public housing be gone, but the whispers along the street, the blasting of music, the smiles, and most importantly human beings like Freddie Gray are gone without a trace. A remnant of their being except faded photos and newspaper clippings.

It’s easy to pick a Black person out of the projects because that is where one would find many Black residents. It’s easy to patrol a neighborhood that holds the projects and the adjacent blocks. The idea, the reasons, and excuses are rather simple: “high crime happens there.” The urban lullaby of sirens and helicopters ushers in the night. Police circle neighborhoods. Helicopters shine lights in homes. The buzz of propellers and the spin of the blades create an anxious annoyance. Sirens rapidly screaming down the block to corner a Black person. Any Black person. This is Baltimore. This is the city where I am from. A city that helped create both mine and Freddie Gray’s identity. Freddie Gray and I are from the same zip code. The same area. The two of us are examples of what life can be like in Baltimore. Both going through public schools and existing in the city. The question becomes what to make of the Black Baltimorean? The factors that influence the landscape of development for many young Black people in the city. In one regard, we are all
the same. In many instances, we are vastly different. Yet somehow, our city has great effects on our trajectory and progress into adulthood.

Baltimore is not extremely different than other cities full of Black people. Cities full of the timeline of America, the history of Blackness has also been a history of violence and racism. It’s unfortunate that it it’s also a part of American Blackness. To be Black American is to never have home field advantage wherever you are. I am interested in talking about the relationship or influences that Black America has to policing. There is no number of videos of police officers dancing at barbeques or playing basketball with children that can erase the decades of fear and harm enacted by police. These viral supposedly “heart-warming” moments are to persuade the public that police are a part of our community and they come in peace. However, these are nothing more than propaganda almost perfectly placed to remind us that “Blue Lives Matter.” Police can separate their humanity from their line of work. Being a police officer is not an identity, but it has become one which aids in the “us” vs. “them” mentality. Black and Latinx people cannot peel off their skin or culture like an officer can with their uniform.

While researching, I was able to read a book called *Unruly Rhetorics* which is a collection of essays regarding protest and the use of the body as protest. Within the book, there are a few essays that resonated with the essence of the uprising and the identity struggles of Blackness. The first essay, “Walking With Relatives,” describes the importance of culture and its connection to the environment. Before the start of the essay, there are two epigraphs: “We are protectors, not protesters,” and “Bodies carry stories; bodies tell stories. This story, among the many stories we hold close” (Anderson 46). Indigenous peoples, as described in this essay, refer to themselves as protectors instead of protesters. There is a cultural and spiritual connection to the earth which therefore creates a responsibility to the earth. They feel an obligation to preserve and protect the
land around them. This concept is not much different from Black people and their culture or communities. We feel a need to preserve the facets of what we know to be a part of us, including each other. Therefore, we protest or riot even, using our bodies as pieces of demonstrations to convey the message. Black people, Black Baltimoreans are the narrative of Baltimore. We are the culture and the life that creates the most attractive elements of the city. Our elders who have inhabited the city since the day they were born can relive and retell every change in the city’s history. From remembering being the first Black student in Loyola University’s engineering class to the rise and fall of Sparrow’s Point, people are preservation of history because history lives within them. Their eyes are the recorders of our culture. They are how we learn and from what they tell us, even how we evolve. The relationship between a people and their surrounding heavily influences interactions and care of the surrounding. Baltimoreans have a pride in our city. From the way we talk, dance, to our style and mannerisms, we have crafted our personhood through our neighborhoods and elders who inhabited those row homes. The row home is a part of the identity. The city aesthetic: corner stores, late nights on marble steps under streetlights. Identity linked to culture linked to the environment. Anderson writes, “Knowing ourselves to be inextricably connected to the earth, we as Native peoples, have resisted an ideology that would sever that connection. In this and other work, I align with Julie Nagan’s research in (re) mapping the colonial body. Further, I consider the Indigenous body as deeply rooted to place.” (47). Black Baltimoreans will always carry their communities on their backs. Black Baltimoreans proudly talk about their city, often lamenting the experiences that developed their personhood. The attributes that the city gives to us. We will always be linked to our place.

“Walking With Relatives” describes the demonstration for the North Dakota pipeline to specifically highlight the deeply rooted responsibility to the land. Like many protests, the
discontent with the pipeline was met with overt opposition and brute force to stop protectors. A state of emergency was declared, roadblocks were set up to discourage more from joining, and the national guard was called (Anderson 46). Anderson writes, “It’s important to dispel a misconception that’s been too common in the media that this came out of nowhere. Settlers like to believe that colonialism, sad as it was, had ended, and that Indians are, at best, part of the great tapestry of America. We’ve resisted from the start. This is the continuation of a long history.” (46).

Before the uprising in 2015, Black people have found ways to resist and protest violence and systemic injustice. From music to boycotts, our anger has been expressed in various ways. In 2015, many believed this mass act of protest was shocking. Like Indigenous peoples in America, since the first African was brought ashore to America, there has been resistance. There has been revolt and there has been the constant effort to preserve the self. Anderson reminded of me being in Baltimore in 2015 when the national guard rolled down North Avenue with a tank.

I lived near North Avenue. The national guard was on post at the grocery store. Their presence, among the unresolved murder, brought an eerie chill to the city. I caught a glimpse of some of their faces. They smiled, laughed, and some sat on the ground playing cards. As mentioned in "Answering the World's Anticipation," our mayor at the time did in fact say we were destroying the city. The mayor of Baltimore City shunned the youth and others who took to the streets to protest. Her concerns were property damaged and how the city looked nationally. She decided to focus on a CVS that burned, which was rebuilt within a year. She focused on youth on top of a police car. Instead of the matter at hand, Freddie Gray. There were many speculations and rumors about Freddie at the time of his death. The most asked question was, "Why did Freddie run when he saw police?" As a native Baltimorean who grew up in poor Black neighborhoods, to me the answer is very simple. Black people in Baltimore and police do not have a working relationship. I
grew up seeing men like Freddie Gray sitting on sidewalks in handcuffs on my way home from school. The elders caution you not to date boys like him (if you're a girl) or end up like him (if you're a boy). Too many times has a person’s existence been used against them to further a skewed, racist ideal.

Deborah Mutnick authored “Answering the World’s Anticipation,” in Unruly Rhetoric. Mutnick’s essay details the importance and relevance of Richard Wright’s Native Son in reference to modern movements, especially in relation to social movements about race. Native Son is the tragic tale of Bigger Thomas told in three parts. Bigger is extremely poor, sharing a one room apartment with his mother and siblings. Scrambling to survive, Bigger takes part in a plan to rob a store with his friends yet his fear overcomes him. He causes an argument and is outcasted. He takes a job chauffeuring a white man’s pseudo-politically active daughter which results in a murder. By the end of book, Bigger is a changed character, committing a rape and attempted of his girlfriend. His life made him angry and desperate. The overall book is a cautionary tale of the dangers of racial oppression. In addition, Native Son details the arrogance and willful ignorance of the white ally who prides themselves on philanthropy yet provides scraps to Black people in real life. Wright also expands W.E.B DuBois’ double conscious by examining what he considers to be an x-ray. The world is looking through you until it needs you. The world creates a persona for you in which you personify, while maintaining the true self. This matters in context to the Freddie Grays and Baltimores of the world because whiteness has decided what it means to be “ethnic” or even what it means to be Black. The narrative is shaped and framed by that of those who hold the power. Although Black people have crafted and created a culture that keeps evolving, white people are continuously working to absorb the culture and personhood of Blackness. In addition, American whiteness has created structures that allow for the perversion of Black cultures as well
as compromising aspects that we have reworked to become cultural stables. The idea of the “hood,” “soul food,” or even “busting the top of a fire hydrant,” are a few examples of things born out of necessity for Black people. The idea of being proud of the hood or being “stamped” in the “hood” is a sense of honor and survival we gained from being raised in a place that was not always conducive to our growth.

The “hood” has become the dwelling for many Black Baltimoreans. When we think of the hood, we often think of violence, poverty, over policing, inequitable education, dilapidated houses and potential drugs. These things exist. Struggles exist, yet through what would seem like pessimism is an abundance of Black which joy which has become a form of resistance. However, one must acknowledge how the “hood” or even public housing came to be. One must consider how Black people became classified as low income and (what would seem as) damned to areas in which resources are low and crime seems high. Our circumstances were given to us by oppressive powers. The wizard behind the curtain, always working to change the theme of Emerald city. A metaphor for the economic and social living conditions for Black people. So, we find ourselves in context to Deborah Mutnik’s essay and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Mutnik writes, “Bigger is the manifestation in *Native Son*, of the underlying social structures of 1930s America, a racist, industrializing society founded on slavery and hit hard by the Great Depression” (211). We at times are manifestations or products even of the constraints of our society. We are all greatly affected by the world in which we are raised. Although we are “products of our environment,” each one of us is built differently. Our surroundings build our character and personality. Mutnik argues, “Indelibly shaped by these experiences, as he was by his personal knowledge of Black life and white power structure, Wright forged a dialectal understanding of himself and his world. With this ‘x-ray vision,’ I argue, we can more clearly see how the rhetoric of liberal democracy- the
‘open hand’- masks the violent means by which the dominant white capitalist power structure controls and destroys not only the Bigger Thomas’s of the world but also, ultimately, the very idea of ‘The Dream’” (212). Whiteness and its structures contribute to the vilifying and criminality of Blackness, crucifying the Black body and Black culture, yet refusing to admit its role. Bigger Thomas is a violent metaphor for what whiteness thinks it should punish. Like Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, a creation of its maker’s greed and brutality, Bigger is the manifestation of the white gaze applied to a Black man. So, when Freddie Gray, Tyrone West, or countless other Black bodies publicly executed to remind us that there is a Bigger Thomas or only six degrees of separation from an untimely death caused by Whiteness.

Like Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, we are conventions of the society we grew to know. Our actions often reflect a manifestation of our society in some way. So, when I saw the national guard, like the scene from the Alfred Hitchcock's, "The Birds," I shook my head. I was startled. In my mind, I thought, how nice it must be to not be on the receiving end of brutality and a government that condemns you for speaking up against murder. How nice it must be to be looked at from a different lens because you are in uniform? Or speaking up against destroying the very land in which we all live and use. It's truly baffling at the carelessness of our elected officials. It sends a very clear message about trust and what matters. Indigenous people use their bodies to represent pain, loss, and history. Our bodies are histories, walking stories, and true connections to those before us. If we mistreat our bodies, it very much reflects how we treat our resources and our ancestries. At the time, I didn't have the knowledge presented in "Answering the World's Anticipation." Much like Gray and other young men in Baltimore, even myself, we built differently. The way racism and misogyny molded me is different than the way it shaped them. Essentialy, we are cut from the same cloth. There are factors in my life that influenced me to
become what I am and have the privilege of higher education. At times, I often reflect on growing in Baltimore. The person one could become. The opportunities that we miss. The opportunities we are given.
**Baltimore Uprising**

“We had been seeing police violence happen, but I do not think that we were always ready for it to be that close to home like I lived I lived over West when I lived in Baltimore.”

- D. Blair

What’s the difference between a riot and an uprising? The answer hides within who is watching, listening, and most of all participating. From Ferguson to Baltimore city, the expression of the unheard and unnoticed is reflected in its treatment of them and reactions to continued assault on Black communities. Uprisings are our answers. Uprisings are a cry to be seen and heard. They are a statement from wounded communities (Steinmetz). Baltimore is no different. In April 2015, there was a week that shifted the cultural climate of Baltimore. Freddie Gray was arrested in West Baltimore after exchanging a look with police. He was forcibly taken and put into a police van in which he ends ups severely injured. Injuries resulting in death. Hayes describes the feeling in the air as tensions grew in the city,

Right, like you like I know some people about the fight. I'm not I don't think I'm about to fight, but I'm ready just in case someone cut my way. Right. Like, that's how it felt. Right. Like it was a deep, bone chilling tension. And I think it was very interesting to me because I recognized. Right. So I've been to Ferguson during their protests. Oh. And it was wild to me to think that, oh, shit, this is happening here, like in the back of my mind, I knew this was this was our flash point moment. This was over. Right. Because it felt just like and understand that Ferguson felt like that

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3 Banks argues that the reframing and mislabeling of a protest t riot skews conversations of advocacy for Black lives.
from the minute Mike Brown died to like January of the next year. It was just a powder keg. Because when I went, it was in October. This is like two months after he's already been dead. It's like about a warzone.

Most often, the city is described as a warzone when talking about violence and gun play. However, when the uprising happened, Baltimore became an actual warzone.

When the city erupted, I remember being stuck on University of Baltimore’s campus. My class ended early with frantic news reports of a “massive mob” moving toward the downtown area. The city was terrified that the inner harbor would be under attack. However, that didn’t happen. The commotion stopped at a major point in the city—Pennsylvania and North Avenue. (Which would later be reclaimed as a part of the Black Arts District). I rushed to the subway station to try to get home before more happened. The subway was delayed an hour and when it finally arrived, there were two significant stops that were being avoided—Mondawmin Mall and Penn North because this is where the kids were trapped, and this is where the collective of children was moving to. With my options being slim, I was stranded on campus. Eventually, I made it to my home where I scrolled through Instagram and Twitter, watching the continuous news reels of fire related to Freddie Gray’s murder. Somehow, a CVS was in flames alongside a police car with busted windows and children standing on top. I could see the flames from the end of my block. I could see the uproar from a distance. I watched curiously, as the debates of “destroying community” arose. I watched the flames fueled by continued racism and overlooking Black neighborhoods. The moment Freddie Gray dies was the moment the band aid was ripped off the wound of the city; however the band aid wasn’t doing a good job of containing blood or stopping infection. My heart hurt because my city was hurt. The next day, a chaotic calm fell upon the city. Partly because of curfew and partly because the national guard was deployed. I watched a tank roll down North Ave
and the national guard sat eerily in front of the only grocery store in the area. Soldiers stood guard in our neighborhoods.

This was one of the first times youth took to the streets angrily. Students were trapped and angry. Of course, when people are trapped, they fight. David Blair recalls the “fire” that started the uprising as we saw it:

So these kids are getting out of school and seeing helicopters flying around. They see police in full riot gear holding artillery rifles. The police dispersed the vehicle or the take whatever you want to call it, all of this stuff. And they and they have nowhere to go because the bus transportation hub is shut. So it's like all of the geniuses came together and decided that they were their best move was to release these kids at the same time and trap them with nowhere to go. Of course, kids are pop and hopefully they'll have anything to do, you know what I mean? Like, they feel intimidated. They have to be scared to. If you are 15, getting out of school early, you've got nowhere to go. And the only the only person you could possibly ask about anything is a cop holding a big ass gun. And you're scared to go over and talk to them because you don't know what kind of attitude they'll be going. You know, how many times have we heard the cop just had a bad day and somebody ends up dead?

Blair described the event that was a catalyst for rioting at Penn North, a central neighborhood and transportation hub in the city. The uprising was a toxic cocktail of bubbling oppression, misunderstood youth, depleted neighborhoods, and the death of a person who was all familiar to us. Freddie Gray was someone that all of us knows in some way. After his death, the
emotions and actions of the city happened rapidly. There was Gray’s death, video footage, protests, and then the infamous burning CVS. After the burning of the CVS came “peace” marches, neighborhood clean-ups, the performative celebration in which many people forgot why we were there in the first place. A few days after the bruhaha on Penn and North, an odd block party happened. Baltimore club music blasting, oddly placed non-profits with booths set up with “write why you love your community” using sidewalk chalk. Here, the city was able to both exploit and use youth as well as guilt them for their actions. Brown mentions the importance that education and youth had on the uprising:

  I think that part of the uprising that involves students. Right. That is influenced definitely by the education system, but also the history of organizing in the country. And so young people know that regardless of the fact, if they can quote unquote, do they know that their voices are powerful and they can influence the school's culture, they can influence the classmate to make changes. And so students also use their voices and their body to enforce changes in their schools and also to impact what is happening in the greater world.

  The anger and passion demonstrated by the youth are traditions in the story of Blackness. Children had bouts of rage that they could never express until the uprising happened. Their responses were the responses of everyone in the city. They were our fuel that we needed to break Baltimore as it has done to so many people. The youth were the catalyst for conversations and art that needed to happen. The uprising changed aspects of our city and the way we talk about youth.

  Our youth in Baltimore are an interesting topic in speaking of intersections between adolescence and adulthood. Baltimore is a city full of ethnic people- mostly Black and Brown children that are
forced into conditions beyond their control. We know from history that Baltimore is a segregated city. It was one of the first to establish zoning laws for neighborhoods (Power). In 1910, a Black law student tried to purchase a home in an “all-white residence.” The city was outraged and reacted by creating/adopting a residential segregation ordinance to prevent Black people from living in neighborhoods that housed people. This law restricted Black people to certain blocks. (Rothstein.) This becomes an issue in developing neighborhoods and making neighborhoods a target for various form of harassment or almost villainous plots against Black people. When we consider this regulation with the history of Black people in Baltimore, we create impoverished, underserved youth. We have populations or even generations of Baltimoreans who have grown up with skewed perspectives of racism and sense of self. The city is heavily policed- which has become a social norm for communities full of Black people. When a person spends their life being socially and financially quarantined without proper explanation or exploration of the circumstances, they become burdened and potentially weary. While watching other areas of the city, or even other counties in the state flourish, people get angry.

Black youth start experiencing discrimination before we can understand what is happening. We are thrown into a world where race will be the most important thing about us without us knowing (Lowery). We often learned hard lessons about who we are when we navigate the world. Youth are largely a part of the reason the uprising resulted in a burning police car and a burning CVS. As the tensions arose in the city, the emotions swelled in the youth, and we have this explosion of chaos. They carried much of this rebellion in our communities in the best way they saw fit. I am an advocate for anger. Human beings should be able to express anger and more importantly should have outlets to express anger. Black children’s anger is censored and weaponized against to the point of being vilified. Nothing makes a person angrier than telling them
that cannot be angry. Although students seemed violent and dangerous, they were not. These children were scared in a world that does not see them as children. They were seen as adults rioting and making ruckus in the city. In a city where many of our systems out in place have failed them. Our laws, our school districts, and even part of the culture have failed them. We are existing in a city that has taught us to be failures and to be helpless (Lowery). The uprising is the result. Baltimore City Public Schools constantly and publicly mentions its underserved population and inadequacies as a school district, thus resulting in students that feel incompetent. With this, we produce students who are incapable of processing their feelings or even speaking about larger issues of race.

Looking back on the uprising, the root cause was Gray’s murder; however the cause of his murder is troublesome:

Freddie Gray was not on the run. Freddie Gray was not in the midst of committing. He had not just passed the fake 20 and not known that he had done it. He had not been playing with a gun out at nighttime. It was a toy gun, and he could be confused for having a real gun. He had not been walking from a store and had an exchange and pulled and turned around too quickly for an officer to think he had a gun. Freddie Gray was out in front of his house and a police officer rode by and looked at him in his face. So, whatever. But the entirety of the issue with Freddie Gray is that or the impact of him is that Freddie Gray literally was doing nothing but living on his block. (J Whye)

Freddie had the audacity to exist and make eye-contact with a police officer. He had the audacity to just be a Black body vulnerable enough for consumption by police. The issue with the
murder of Freddie Gray is the metaphor of Black existence. Police take advantage of the power their badge holds, so much so, that even making eye contact with them can be deadly. At that moment any past comes back to haunt you, your present is endangered, and the future uncertain. A Black man with audacity to look at an officer results in his death that people seem to justify with the idea that he ran away from police. Because we are taught to fear police, especially when you have had previous encounters with law, we run. We evade. We are silent. Previous encounters with the law give you a guilty stamp that allows for continued worry and living life while looking over your shoulder or living on grandmother’s prayers. Praying that the law will skip over you one last time if both you and them pretend that you don’t exist. That’s just it- we just want to exist and when we live life as being that actually do, we are punished. Freddie Gray’s death was on the same pavement that many Baltimoreans have walked, the same neighborhoods we pass through and the same city that becomes to artfully embedded in us. It solidifies a big portion of our identity. This uprising was for Freddie Gray but also Tyrone West and Korryn Gaines. This uprising, oddly, made communities come together and we demonstrated a resilience genetically encoded. Our city burned and it bled but it was an epiphany for so many citizens. I do not like to think of people as sacrifices because no one asks to be a sacrifice. Gray represented so many things and people in our city which is what made the uprising so meaningful to us. We were able to hear youth voices and encourage their involvement in advocacy and most importantly, we let police know that despite history and violent language- we exist, and we have a right to.
Black Identity

Toni Morrison once said, “In this country, American means white. Everyone else has to hyphenate.” To be Black is to be a displaced people with broken lineage yet a uniquely crafted culture that has infusions of old traditions throughout the diaspora. Because of the displacement we are not fully American although the Black American identity is American. American Blackness and Black Americans are products of the United States of America. Our history and our lineage are full of trauma and pain. Often, when we detail the stories of Black people, we cannot exclude the close relationship between White supremacy and Blackness. We cannot omit the relationship between the creation of American whiteness alongside the development of Blackness (Zalloua 143-87).4 We are the outsider and much of our history, true histories and identities are family stories passed down. Our entire beings were meant to be uprooted and erased. The creation of the culture comes from the creation the slave, when what we know now as Black American was birthed into a system of forced servitude. Entire systems of language, traditions, and even foods were completed erased. We do not have the advantage of retracing our cultural steps. Our personhood was meant to be broken, permanently but that did not work. When that proved itself to not be effective, Black people were “freed,” with no resources or anything to their names. There was no intention of helping Black people succeed even after slavery ended. This idea is stemmed from post slavery and Civil War society. According to Manning Marable in “The Third Reconstruction: Black Nationalism and Race in a Revolutionary America, “The North had no desire to elevate the Negro to the social and cultural status of an equal. The war was fought "over slavery," but not over

4 Although Zalloua’s book is a post humanist text, Zalloua speaks specifically about the creation of Blackness and the separation of being human in this creation. The Black identity very much as the American identity is based on “othering.”
the status of the slave. The economic system of involuntary servitude was updated along capitalist lines in conformity with the demand of Northern industry and the dominant Republican party.” (4). Formerly enslaved people were granted freedom in a society that still viewed them as enslaved alongside instilled racist ideologies. With the same idea that formerly enslaved people were lesser than or not even human, progress for Black people was stifled. Marable adds, “Reconstruction succumbed to reaction because none of the major parties involved, other than the blacks themselves, had any intention of liberating the Afro- American community from a secondary caste position and from its inferior economic status.” (4). We have been left to our own devices and this is where we began building the Black identity.

Michaela Duchess Brown of Organizing Black reflects on what it means to be Black and American:

I think to be Black American is to be American in the sense that without Black people, there literally would be no [America], at least not as we know it today, considering that America was built on the backs of slaves and indigenous people. I think that I mean and even beyond that, everything about America was an expression of its long history of violence and white supremacy. White supremacy is attached to Blackness. The music, the food. All of it is attached to being Black in America, whether white America wants to acknowledge that or not, I'm on this list because of the violence that exists in American history. I mean, we've literally been in war. The majority of our existence is America. That also is a part of what being Black American means because of the violence inflicted upon us by the state, whether that little physical violence or the violence inflicted by things like environmental racism, structural racism, classism. And so forth and so forth.
The Black identity is existing adjacent to its destruction in America. The public execution of Black bodies has been happening since the first African was forced ashore in America. From public whippings, force feedings to lynching pre and during Jim Crow, the torment of Black bodies has always been widely available for people to ogle and become addicted to. Old Jim Crown post cards with smiling white face while strange fruit swings dreadfully from a tree. In 2021, police killings are no different than the beatings and lynching our grandfathers, great grandfathers, or even great-great grandfather took from white people. Police killings in 2021/22 are nothing more than public reminders for Black people to “stay in line,” or “stop making too much noise.” Just as past lynchings have worked, the victim is vilified and dragged through the mud for justification of the killing. We have to say Emmet Till whistled at a white woman, we have to say Freddie Gray had a criminal record, and we have to tell everyone that Ma’Khia Bryant had a knife and that is why they deserved the fate they received. It’s not okay for Black people to have means to protect themselves. It’s not okay for Black people to be afraid, have anxiety, have claustrophobia or anything that might make their body and mind react “adversely” to pressure, panic, or stress. We have to be cool calm and collected at all times. We have to make officers feel safe in their jobs as police officers. Ma’Khia Bryant was described as erratic, but she was a scared child. In the public sphere, no matter the age, Black people always have to be humbled in some way. We need to be made an example of and learn from our public lashings. Duke says:

I think Black people and this is again, this was me borrowing from them and saw that Black people were in a trance, right. When it comes to social traumas, when it comes to racial oppression and of course, all of these things, Black people are in a trance of trying to make it right in its moments, like Freddie Gray, moments like George Floyd, moments like even covering gains in Brianna Taylor that. Break that
trance momentarily and everyone's like, oh, we need to do something, but it's not a consistent it's not a consistent trance breaking moment. There has to be other work that is done that most people don't know how to do or find value in it. I believe some of that work is a lot more cultural and spiritual based. When we have entire systems of our lives from our side, thinking of from the language that we speak, from the religions that we have access to, so the education we get when everything that we interact with affirms our disenfranchisement. It's not easy to be an advocate for yourself.
**Black Bodies**

“I feel like it's just a game of operation. Like we look at black his body, and instead of getting taking the diseases out, we take the culture out. We take the language, take the life out of the bodies. And so, I think that's where I lean that with the. Mostly because there's been a lack of sacredness around Black body, even being a poet. It's funny, participate in slams and I've traveled the country and I hear poets and it's almost like a mean. They're like how poets dress. It turns Black bodies, like always going like all this emphasis on it. It's because we're trying to put the life back into it like the life beckons because it's just so. Casual, no, it's not sacred.”

-Duke

“Blackness has been central to, rather than excluded from, liberal humanism: the black body is an essential index for the calculation of degree of humanity and the measure of human progress.” (Jackson 46).

In the threads of the American culture and even our American flag, has been sewn the disdain for Blackness that is rooted in hating the Black body. Black bodies have always been on display, commodified or even used for the progress of American success and culture. In addition, the body has been scrutinized and criticized creating a culture and ideology that can announce any thought or statement that comes to mind about our bodies. Even within our own communities, Black bodies have been devalued, internalizing the vitriol created by rhetoric pass down from generations of Americans (Cloud). The oddity in the Black body is as odd as the position of Blackness in America. We are inherently American, yet we are also an “other.” Our foundations
have helped in the creation of this country, yet we do not enjoy the benefits of being American. The belonging, acceptance, pride, and values simply are not present while being Black. There is a distinction between being American and being Black, which is not only present in our culture but also in the ways in which our bodies are regarded.

The word “body” holds several meanings that each have some sort of connotations attached. The word itself can be a verb or noun. Definitions range from a collection of something, a group of people, the main or central part of something and lastly the physical structure of a person or animal- the flesh, blood, and bones of an organism. These definitions become particularly important in reference to different aspects of Blackness. The body in which we exist alongside the people we coexist with in a community make a body concept central to understanding Blackness.

**Group of people**

Our ancestors crafted this identity for us in America. We are American but not really. Upon forcible displacement, our ancestors worked to craft a culture, redefined themselves, and rebuild. With the remains of their own identities in addition to what they were given in this land, they were able to create Black American culture. We are a communal, collective people which is remnant of our early people. The traditions, the stories, and the routines we share are a part of a collective sense of being. Black people are not a monolith- a common place phrase to encourage the idea that we are individuals with individual interests. The idea behind this was to discourage white supremacist values that categorized Black people as one person. Black people do not move as one or exist as one. We have an array of interests, backgrounds, perspectives, and tastes. However, we move within community to create diversity within our community. We have shared language, food, customs, and even social norms. We have shared experiences in our families and in our societies.
We are communal yet we are individual, much the ancestors who deeply rooted themselves in our origin. Although, at the time, they were not Black as we know it today, the origins of Blackness lie within the history of our ancestors.

**Main or central part**

A narrative. A story with an introduction, large part, and conclusion- a simplified formula for a story. The largest part of a story like the extent and make up of our bodies. Silencing our stories and the stories we wish to tell while highlighting the struggle and pain created by the main or central part of the American story. Our introduction to the self, the history, the origins, is slavery. I remember the first thing I learned about Black people was that “we were slaves,” which would later be offset by the mantra, “we were kings.” This definition of body become particularly important in how the largest, most significant part of the Black story is told- the way in which the narrative is shaped. From 3/5th a person to being “the help,” the main idea of the story, the common theme is degradation or being devalued. We are allowed to use our bodies to service the general public. Break our backs to build, cook, and clean but nothing more. Our bodies are a service, a tool even. The conclusion to the story, seems to be already determined.

Yet somehow in this story, we are caught at intersections of violence rooted in white supremacy. Whether we are victims of police violence or street violence, the root cause is the narrative created by white supremacy. The central story, the body of the story determines the main theme or idea. We need to shift the body of our stories and the story of Blackness.

**Physical Space**

The quotes at the beginning of this chapter are common phrases in relation to Black bodies:
“Can I touch your hair?”/ “Is that all your real hair?”

The complexity and politics of Black have caused ogling and perversion in regard to the body. I distinctly remember, in my time as an undergraduate student at University of Baltimore, I was sitting preparing for a class. My nose was buried in book when in felt a swift, chilly breeze on my scalp. I looked up to find an older white woman lifting my twist, one by one to examine them. Her nimble fingers gripping and yanking. “Is this hair? Is it yarn?” She questioned with enthusiasm as I sat in shock. I quickly snatched my hair away from her and in that moment, with glasses on the tip of her nose, she seemed almost offended that I would take my hair away. “Well, it’s really cool. I love it,” she says in an attempt to make things seem less invasive. Because liking my hair was enough for her to touch each twist and examine it. I sat for minute afterward, replaying what just happened and how this was supposed to be “normal.” This is not a normal occurrence and nor should it be. Hair is a part of the body and because Black people are “othered” so often that our hairstyles are subject to speculation. Historically, Black bodies have been easily accessible for white people. The entitlement and accessibility results in my hair becoming and interactive display for other people to touch and ogle.

“She has a booty like a Black girl.”/ “Cover up, there are men in the house.”

Our bodies are oversexualized. Because of our natural features and animalistic comparisons, we become targets for sexualization (Rhodes). Little Black girls start to become women, in the eyes of our society and public upon going through puberty. Hips get wider, curves develop and suddenly our bodies are an assault and temptation to every man whose urges are triggered by a body. In my youth, I took a school trip to Hershey Park where I was wearing white swim shorts. As myself and my classmates lined up to load the bus, my seventh-grade social studies
teacher pulled me out of line to make “an example” of me. She grabbed my arm and told me I needed to change my clothes, or I wasn’t getting on the bus. She also told me that I should “be shamed for comin’ out the house like that.” The shorts were an inch above my fingertips when I measured with my hand. I changed to a longer pair of denim shorts of which she approved and talked about for the first fifteen minutes of being on the bus. Even my classmates decided to join her in saying that I wore the shorts because I “knew boys would be there.” I knew from an early age that my body would be judged differently. I always needed to be modestly or “properly” dressed. Our physical attributes become the most important things about us and the things that make us valuable.

Our physical assets become what sets us apart from other women. That concept becomes a problem not only because it dehumanizes us but also creates unrealistic beauty standards. The statement above, about white women having a “booty like a Black girl,” diminishes our bodies while upholding racist values that reduces us to our bodies. The idea that this is desirable on white women or that white women can “replace” Black women because of a “butt” not only contributes to cultural appropriation but makes physical aspects of the body a novelty and commodity to be packaged and sold. The things that can cause a Black women scrutiny will cause praise for white women. The body is used.

No Hoodies in School

Black children live in the paradox of adulthood and adolescence. After a certain time, we are no longer seen as children. We become adults. Because we are seen as adults, we have less room for error and our punishments are harsher. We do not have the luxury of childhood wonder or silliness because we are in a constant state of fear for being policed. School districts that are
predominantly ethnic are sure to keep policies that oppress children in place. We can look to something as simple as a dress code. Children are encouraged to modestly cover their bodies but still be visible enough to not pose a threat. Young Black men are the biggest targets of the “no hoodies” policy in schools. Hoodies are unsafe, supposedly. Wearing a hoodie causes death and to some a “justifiable death,” because this makes a person seem more threatening. Banning hoodies, especially in school, is a policy that encourages the idea that a hoodie, particularly on a Black body is fear and threat. Many school districts will enforce this policy due to safety. Implying that safety is an issue because of a hoodie implies that violence enacted upon children because of their attire is necessary. We can look to the case of Trayvon Martin. Part of the reason Trayvon was followed was because he wore a hoodie. I was seventeen years old when Trayvon Martin was murdered, and this changed my perspective of Black bodies and the space we hold. We are not allowed to casually wear a hoodie, casually walk-through neighborhoods, or causally exist without the threat of being compromised by whiteness.

The physical body is the most complex and compelling when speaking of Blackness. The exploitation and constant degradation of the Black body is a standard throughout history. It is a commodity, complexity, and captivating all at once in America. In the history of America, Black bodies have always been accessible for the use of white consumption. We can look at direct ways in history of forced labor or forced breeding to present day exploitation of Black media influencers. Black culture and Black dances being constantly co-opted by whiteness. The Black body has been used like a product. Our existence, as an individual and collective body is constantly being picked apart, repurposed, and repackaged to us. We take Black bodies, and we make them a commodity for exploit. We make caricatures of Blackness that transcends our actual being. With technology and current forms of media, we are able to separate Black people from being human. For example,
TikTok has created a wasteland of cultural appropriation and mimicking that reduce our existence, especially that of Black women. Videos that make fun of the attributes of a culture that is denied by a general public.

At times, we are too accepting of the viral masking that detracts from our existence. These contribute to the reduction of our humanity. We are funny. We are characters created but not actual people. Technology influences otherness. Our media encourages othering and racial difference. Within our categories, we ignore some beings over others within their own category. This creates hierarchy within the othered. For example, women of color are often considered the lowest in society. Black women are highly disregarded and ignored by peers and media. When Black women are killed by police, protests are smaller, and justice is rarely served. We can look at the murder of Briana Taylor. She as a person was erased, and she became a hashtag, a meme, and a pseudo symbol for social justice. Her essence disappeared in a sea of technology. Furthermore, modern news allows a cyclic loop of violence to occur to the Black body. We see a continuous video of a murder. According to Zahi Zalloua in Being Posthuman: Ontologies of the Future,

The violence against Black people, which we are witnessing on YouTube videos, Instagrams, and TV news, is conveniently gendered as violence against Black men. But there is a problem here, and it is twofold: we tend to lose sight of the fact that Black women, children, and LGBT people are losing their breath through the technologies of social death, just as Black heterosexual men are, albeit in less visible and less mediatized ways. We also get drawn into responding to the phobic anxieties of White and non-Black civil society, the threat of the Black man, and, as such, we offer sustenance to that juggernaut (civil society) even as we try to dismantle it. (154)
Violence enacted upon Black bodies is in correlation to not only the history of the body but the continued separation of being and its essence. Technology allows us to separate the being from what is happening to them on screen. Often, society creates these ideas around Black people being superhuman or even not emoting the same as other people. We make Black women seem invincible by measuring them on a gradient of endurance while challenging any feeling or thought that does not contribute to that idea. We must constantly be aware of our bodies. Shrink ourselves to make others comfortable. We dispose of our culture to offset the collective body to conform to the idea of America.

Ralikh Hayes laments the value of Black bodies in America:

Well, because blackness and black bodies is seen as capital, right? Where white bodies and white people are seen as those who utilize capital. Right. So, is the difference between seen as a tool and a commodity? To be managed and, you know, controlled to being seen as a person. Right, because I firmly believe police were created to protect property and things like to maintain power, right. And so why do you think they harass black communities? Because we're a thing to capitalism, right? Like we're not. You have to remember; we're not too far removed from actually being a social. And that's where police come from. Right, slave catchers. And so if your culture is to manage a commodity and that's and that's why they're still doing. Yes, yes, right, like the commodity, they manage it, public safety, it's white fear. Oh. Like they manage white fear of black bodies by being the instrument of control of the state or one of many instruments, but like the most blunt one they have, that's the instrument. They say, I'm going to kill you. If you don't comply.
When your body is a thing to be poked, prodded, and used, how could it possibly be protected by the forces that want to use you? This is how we get to Freddie Gray and the many deaths such as his. Freddie Gray was trying to deny police access to his being, his body. When the officers were denied that they took offense. When the officers are told that Blackness is not a part of their system, this creates anger which leads to the deaths of Black people.
Say Their Names

Most often when we talk about police encounters in reference to danger and detriment, we focus on the male experience. Our idea of brutality and misconduct centers cisgender heterosexual men. We neglect the transgender individuals, other individuals apart of the LGBTQ community, sex workers of color, and women of color (Zalloua). There is a misconception that the medical industry is more harmful to Black women than police, when in fact Black women are susceptible to violence in all facets. I know through my own experiences with police that being perceived female does not make you less intimidating to police especially when your skin has melanin (Battle).

My first encounters with police were beyond unpleasant and solidified the tension that we feel today. Although, no one said it to me directly or told me the reasons why when I was growing up, I always felt the looming sense of fear and suspense when police officers patrolled the neighborhoods. The squad cars and blaring lights circled city blocks almost like vultures searching for carcasses. Police officers with hand on their guns, flashlights shoved in faces, and young men sitting curbside handcuffed and humiliated by unexpected audience. Often, their language was like a journey to a past decade where the word “boy” replaced the idea of man or even a formal name. The neighborhood would stand still as if time would stop when they showed up. Balls stopped dribbling, kids stopped running, women stopped stalking, and Black men would stand straight with stiff necks. I would watch from the window as people cowered and whispered. Growing up in the city, I lived near drug dealers, who at the time I thought were just men who just hung out on the corners with extreme amounts of money. To me, they were nice young men in my neighborhood.

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5 Zalloua points out the disparity between acknowledging the death of Black men and other Black beings.
So, when the police came, especially for them, I was so baffled. They would run frantically and look for hideouts. The police would grab them and put them on the sidewalks. Put them on display for the entire block to see. They were handcuffed and scolded. So, one could imagine how terrifying and unfair that looked through the eyes of a six-year-old. Police officers who were almost always men, who were almost always white, shouting in the faces of young men who looked like me. They would be hauled away and almost never returned, to be replaced by a new set of guys standing on the corner. My idea of police started with this. When officers in my neighborhood would take post and wave to us kids coming home from school, I often felt my stomach flip. They would assist in crossing the street to make us forget about the scene they had caused the night before. Women clutched their hearts, hoping it wasn’t their son they were coming for. Hoping that the men they had captured would be okay. The images of young men in handcuffs help solidify the idea that police brutality is reserved for men. The misconception that only men are victims of police violence comes from a long history of men being centered when speaking about racial violence. Even in my own young mind, I associated police violence with men, until I started having my own encounters with police.

The assumption was and partly still is that Black women’s death by police hold less weight in our community than that of Black men (Battle). When Black women are killed by police our protest generate smaller numbers or in the case of Korryn Gaines, we are labeled as crazy. Gaines was not in Baltimore city, however; she was in Maryland. Gaines was close enough to Baltimore that her death, much like Freddie Gray is crucial in not only understanding the relationship to police but the impact of police presence and violence to Black American individuals. As I grew, my ideas about police were continuously solidified by the growing list of names and video footage of unreasonable murder. In addition to murder, there were home invasions, lost cases of people
they didn’t care about, and useless calls for help. It wasn’t until I was 17 that I would have my own encounter with police that reshaped my silent caution about police. What became abundantly clear was that if anything should happen to me, whether it be police violence or violence, because I am a Black woman, my death would be easily ignored or commodified. We saw this with the murder of Breonna Taylor. Taylor became a face to put on t-shirts and another meme to plaster around social media. She became another pseudo symbol of social justice (Gomez).

I was a month removed from high school graduation. My best friend and I were sitting in her first car- a minivan in a mute color. She was double parked but not blocking the flow of traffic. We were gossiping about graduating and whatever high school memories could still be lingering after graduation. A police officer circled the block three times. I remember her saying, “ugh let me just pull over so he doesn’t say anything.” A second after she parked, the police office put on his siren, pulled behind her, then stepped out of his car. He said we looked suspicious sitting in the car talking. He also said she tried to drive away when he signaled her. The officer didn’t signal her in any way. He circled the block three times. We looked at each other and we were frozen. Police officers have the fortunate opportunities to massage reality to conform to their needs. It’s the immunity that allows them to continue to be fear invoking because truth does not exist in these small threatening encounters.

My entire life, I had heard bad stories about police and what they do to Black people. The officer was angry. His brows were furrowed, and he banged on the window of the car. She rolled down the window. Instantly, he shined a blinding flashlight into our eyes. He was yelling. He demanded a license or ID. There was another siren and another officer flashing a light in the passenger seat window. That was followed by lights shining in the back seat of her car. There
was a police van behind us. In that moment, my heart almost exploded. I had never been
arrested in my life and I hadn’t had many personal encounters with the police. At the time, I didn’t
realize that we were fortunate enough to be able to reflect on that moment later in our lives. He let
us off with a warning. After they drove away, we sat angry for a moment. I went into my house,
thinking about being yelled at by a police officer. I sat thinking about the flashlights in our eyes
and the flashlights searching her back seat through the window. I thought about the police van. I
looked in the mirror, trying to see if I looked suspicious in my work uniform- a green polo shirt.

We were two Black girls sitting in a car. Two Black girls laughing about nonsense we can’t
even remember now. We were two Black girls who looked suspicious enough to garner police
attention. This was my first personal encounter with police. That is rather mild compared to public
beatings, public executions, and tear gas. That moment along with the murder of Trayvon Martin
shifted my perspective about a lot of things including law enforcement. At that time in my life, I
reflected on the neighborhood boys who ran from police and mothers clutching their pearls. That
night, after going into my home, I saw the same look in my mother’s eyes that the women had for
their sons. My mother clutching her chest, praising God that her seventeen-year-old daughter made
it back home. In many cases, as we have seen, this is a luxury and privilege not afforded to Black
women (Gomez).

Korryn Gaines was a Maryland woman whose death came a year after Freddie Gray in
Randallstown, Maryland. Gaines had several encounters with police that ultimately lead to the six-
hour standoff at her apartment in Baltimore County. The police came to her home to serve her a
misdemeanor warrant; however, Gaines refused to let them into her home. This is where a problem
begins for some people who are familiar with the story. Gaines, much like Gray, was a Black
person with the audacity. She had the gall to tell police officers “no,” and request identification
and information regarding the request for her ID. Throughout our culture, we have deemed police officers untouchable and attached the idea of heroism to wearing the uniform. With this, being an officer becomes a part of a person’s identity. Officers do not like to be told no or questioned because of the uniform. Our culture has given police officers the luxury to take advantage of their badge in any way they see fit. In August of 2016, police gunned Gaines down in her home while injuring her five-year-old son. Before the shooting, she sat on her floor with a rifle aimed at the door. Gaines negotiated with police until her demise. The aftermath included her being labeled as “crazy” and “unstable.” She was blame for her death and was said to be antagonizing the police. Gaines defied the ideas of how Black women should act in her resistance to police. Korryn was vocal and what some would call defiant. She voiced her opinions and knowledge to police. She would go on Facebook live and tell viewers that she felt like the police were constantly harassing her. In her last day of life, Korryn took to Facebook with a gun in one hand while police barricaded her door. Black women are supposed to be silently strong and resilient. Black women are caught in a paradox of being vilified for being stereotyped as “loud, ghetto, domineering” and even, “emasculating,” yet as women we need to “submissive, soft,” and background noise. Black women have had a history of leading movements from afar and not getting the recognition they deserved. Gaines, although frowned upon, was in her own continuing this tradition of fearless, outspoken Black women.

We can even look at the case of Ma’Khia Bryant, as previously mentioned. Ma’Khia was a child gunned down by police after calling them to help her after breaking up a fight. Yet somehow, Ma’khia was shot by the police. Another public execution of a Black body for the world to see. Another Black body on display. The public execution of Black bodies has been happening since the first African was forced ashore in America. From public whippings and, force feedings
to lynchings pre and during Jim Crow, the torment of Black bodies has always been widely available for people to ogle and become addicted to. Police killings in 2012, 2015, or even 2021 are nothing more than public reminders for Black people to “stay in line,” or “stop making too much noise.” Just as past lynchings have worked, the victim is vilified and dragged through the mud for justification of the killing. Ma’Khia was described as erratic—she was a scared child. In the public sphere, no matter the age, Black women always must be humbled in some way. We need to be made an example of and learn from our public lashings (Battle).

When Ma’Khia Bryant called the police, she wasn’t expecting to see sixteen short years of life gone. When we look back on her social media presence, we see her youth. Her age was so apparent in her videos. So happy go-lucky. The police fired four rounds into her chest without securing the scene, protecting, or serving Ms. Bryant. The gleeful girl who made hair tutorials on TikTok. The happy teenager who dances to famous TikTok songs has now been reduced to an Instagram and twitter hashtag. Ma’khia is another sullen symbol of social justice gone awry. Somehow, Ma’khia has been categorized as a woman. Her body size is mentioned in media coverage, as if that justifies the officer’s “fear” or “reasons for his actions.” The idea that a large Black body deserves to be harmed is a worrisome assumption that results in death. Fat Black bodies. Larger Black bodies. Black bodies that take up size become monsters in the public sphere or “objects” that need to be tamed. The general culture is unfriendly to fat bodies. They are ridiculed. They are abused and shunned by our communities. Size is an intense subject in Black households, especially for young women.

Our bodies are never our own, especially as young women. This is a lesson we learn early. Autonomy is a word foreign to our vocabulary. The idea quickly passes, as our bodies are constant reminders of birth, legislation, or sexualization. Whether we are beaten, policed for clothes, or told
that our size makes us seem intimidating, it is clear that every opinion or criticism is deemed warranted and necessary by our community. Chubby Black girls are not extended grace. Not even a caress. Instead, we are met with hostility, tips for dieting, and unsolicited comments from bystanders or relatives. That is, until we are being reprimanded in public. Until some form of public embarrassment is bestowed upon us. This, somehow, makes people feel vindicated. The large Black body that takes ups what is deemed as “too much space” is finally made to feel badly about its action. I think of Ma’Khia Bryant with this criticism. She has been adultified. Sympathy been erased from her.

According to the New York Times, “A 2017 report by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality found that, because of layers of gendered racism, adults tend to view Black girls as more threatening, more aggressive, more mature and less innocent than white girls of the same age, robbing Black girls of the freedom to be children.” So, what does this mean for Black girls? Black girls aren’t seen as children after age ten. We become women with emotions and burdens placed upon us by the society in which we live. We are victims of racism and sexism. The intersection causes an unexpected demise. This also means that Black girls cannot slump their heads on desks. We cannot be tired, hungry, or angry. We cannot be human or have human emotions. For Black girls to be human or get any inkling of sympathy from anyone, we must be demure, quiet, or even invisible. Those girls become “good students,” “most likely to succeed,” or in reality, girls awaiting the chance to be human. What happens when a Black girl cries or dies alone? Who is around to collect her tears or see her teen angst? No one. Who was around for Ma’khia? The thing is, I could have easily been Ma’khia. In fact, I am Ma’khia. The Black girl with hopes of becoming a woman who could be understood.
The Aftermath

What does it mean to be erased while actively existing?

This concept is not new to America. In the genesis of our nation, we structured laws and social norms on genocide, greed, and othering. Our nation has always needed an enemy whether abroad or on the home front. The other—the difference in appearance and custom—becomes the enemy and the outcast. America has specialized in telling other who they should be and who they are while erasing previous identity. Throughout history, perseverance and the struggle of power has been present between America and its Black citizen. Instead of taking corrective measures to realize the humanity of Black people, policy has found ways to reinvent structural racism. In maneuvering through the use of the Black body, Black existence, and the growth of Baltimore culture, we see progress made by Black people.

With Black death, Black joy, and Black resistance all coinciding, the question becomes “what next”? After all the history, death, and destruction, where does this leave the state of Blackness and the Black body? Is there ever a time when Black people will not be commodified? More importantly, what is happening in Baltimore? David Blair states,

I do love that even though it happened, it sparked the conversation of what are the problems that are really that Baltimore are really facing, you know, and did bring a lot of it did bring a lot of attention to the city. It really did help us kind of try to address some of the youth issues that we have going on. But as far as what could have been better, I think the governmental response could have been different. You know, I think. The decision like I said earlier, the decision to close that transportation hub is going to be a decision that haunts this city forever.
The state of Blackness is in a devastating position in which we are being empowered but are still powerless. We are still watching and circulating footage of Black death. Our bodies and culture are still being used and taken against our will. We have not had another uprising, yet we have had several protests after the death of Freddie Gray. It seems like a never-ending cycle of trauma for Black Americans to be reminded of our constant struggle. Although our uprising and protest have sparked bouts of change, police abolition is far from an actual possibility for Black people. Our hope lies with deconstructing and maybe reconstructing the police as we know it. But we know with the ways in which police are admired, this is not feasible. We are a nation that believes police are necessary. As long as we hold this belief, we will continue to see Blackness diminished and humanity lost.

The police and justice system as we know it is tarnished to no end. Structurally, it is like a tree that no longer bears fruit. We are depending on a barren source to produce necessity for livelihoods. We are only as important as our deaths. Our country is as young as Black American identity. Black lineage and legacy are still being crafted. We are still writing a history for ourselves that does not involve the white gaze. We have to separate ourselves from the idea of Blackness and identity shaped by white supremacy. Our being and essence will transcend Black trauma, even if not in my lifetime.
References


