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"Your Pants Won't Save You": Why Black Youth Challenge Race-Based Police Surveillance and the Demands of Black Respectability Politics

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Abstract

The politics of "Black Respectability" foreground Black citizens' individual and collective responsibility to prioritize self-policing, polish, and propriety. Proponents believe that the steady performance of restraint and decorum is critical and that any departure from that repertoire can result in punishment. The belief that racially minoritized youth must earn respect and autonomy, rather than see those rights protected as a standard afforded to all community members, may not be widely held by younger Black people. The following study makes use of interview data collected from 23 Black Baltimore City millennials who shared their perspectives on the social and political contexts that led to Freddie Gray's death while in Baltimore Police custody. When discussing police officers' pursuit of citizens who match Freddie Gray's outward appearance, younger respondents resisted the demands of Black Respectability Politics and, instead, asserted their right to pass through their neighborhoods absent state-sanctioned harassment. This study features an exploration of how generational membership moderates legal socialization, attitudes about personal responsibility for police profiling, and beliefs about the right to the same full spectrum of freedoms and protections enjoyed by majority citizens. Implications for critical race theory, legal cynicism, and intergenerational coalition building are also discussed.

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> The gods will not save you.
> —Ervin H. Burrell, The Wire[1]

> [I]t's the postmodern institutions that are the gods. And they are gods. And no one is bigger.
> —David Simon, "Behind The Wire"[2]

Freddie Carlos Gray, Jr., was born on August 16, 1984, and was pronounced dead on April 19, 2015. On April 12, 2015, Gray was arrested by officers of the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) for allegedly possessing an illegal switchblade. Eyewitness accounts and video footage suggest that the six BPD officers involved in Gray's arrest used excessive force while detaining him. It was also reported that the officers failed to safely secure Gray inside the transport van, resulting in his sustaining lethal injuries to his larynx and spinal cord. The ongoing outcry that unfolded following Freddie Gray's death escalated to a series of riots and acts of arson following his funeral service on April 27, 2015. Many Baltimore City residents have expressed disappointment in the violent and destructive events that ensued. However, there may not be consensus around the empathy extended to protestors who may have been responding with hurt and anger to what scholars including Alexander (2010) and Embrick (2015) might refer to as contemporary state-sanctioned lynching.

To provide some context, note that Baltimore City residents have not only been subjected to the blows of structural violence for decades, but that those conditions were exacerbated by the War on Drugs and Broken Windows-based law enforcement ideologies (Collins, 2007). Police and civilian relations were radically transformed when the urgency of ramped up surveillance measures outweighed concerns about due process, fourth amendment protections, and probable cause requirements. Investigative journalism revealed that the architects of these crime reduction initiatives were more concerned with (and seduced by) the potential impact of the potentially crime-reducing ends derived from their new tactics, than the constitutionality of their means (Simon, 2006; Simon & Burns, 1997). For example, in the late 1980s through the early 2000s, the BPD conducted mass arrests in which residents of primarily Black neighborhoods were rounded up for nonexistent charges (Pinard, 2015).[3] This practice was animated by a war-like mentality through which sworn officers abandoned the community policing elements associated with the original intentions of Wilson and Kelling's (1982) Broken Windows thesis (Taylor, 2001). They became occupiers and enforcers rather than partners in protection, and used aggressive tactics that have sown immense distrust among residents, many of whom, in 2015, were coming of age as millennials. At the time of Freddie Grays' death, the setting was rife for cynicism, as younger Black Baltimore residents had only known an occupied state where their communities were systematically preyed upon.

In a contemporary civil rights social movement context marked by a growing generational divide (Franklin, 2014; Hockin & Brunson, 2016), it is important to investigate how age and generational membership condition perceptions of state-sponsored violence and injustice and correlate with attitudes about personal and collective responsibility for those circumstances. Specifically, this study will explore the roots and responses of the remerging questions: What could Freddie have done differently to protect himself from police suspicion? What can anyone who appears to be "like Freddie Gray" do in such a climate? In addition to exploring responses to this potentially harmful victim-blaming stance, proponents of social justice must interrogate how youth who may "look like" Freddie Gray, respond to elder Black community members who are often the authority figures posing these sorts of questions.

Much of this top-down institutional authority or community behavioral policing directed at Black youth,[4] we believe, might be derived from older Black citizens' desire to aspire to Black Respectability—in ideology and practice. Mosse (1985) describes respectability as a middle-class creed with strong ties to elite White nationalism derived from Western Europe and the United States. The dogma is as moral and philosophical as it is expressive, in that respectable people are held in high regard because they comport themselves as such and vice versa. The ascribed norms for behavior in public and private space dictate what constitutes acceptable social behavior, and those guidelines are deeply racialized, gendered, and class-based. Often the accomplishment of respectability focuses squarely on what one is not to do or say and with whom they are not to do it. Black Respectability, then, is hinged on Black citizens' ability to distance themselves from every disdainful element of Black culture that White majority community members publicly resent (Duneier, 1992; Ford, 2015; Patillo, 2007). In addition to the harmful saturation of suggestions that Black culture is of little value and confers minimal benefits in the efforts to acquire social capital in civilized White society (Duncan & McCoy, 2007), it is believed that a poor respectability performance can, and justifiably according to certain polls, cast actors as criminally *other* and at risk of confronting state violence (da Silva, 2013; Nguyen, 2015).

The following study builds on this existing research agenda in two primary ways. In the current research, we first explore how Black youth navigate the expectations of Black Respectability Politics. Second, we will illustrate how their consumption of related messages conditions their attitude both toward state actors and toward their Black elders who may at times hold them responsible for their own victimization. This essay is divided into three parts and explores the intersection of age and perceptions of individual responsibility for unwanted police interaction. First, we offer a theoretical analysis of how criminal justice institutions operate as structures of race-based social control. Next, we review the existing literature that, through various methodologies, highlights Black youth's perspectives on contemporary policing practices. Finally, we discuss the emergent themes that arose from interview data collected from Black millennial Baltimore residents following the death of Freddie Gray in 2015. Their narratives underscore how for young Black Americans, legal cynicism and distrust of

policing practice are heavily conditioned by a rejection of personal responsibility for the misinterpretation of Black suspicion and criminality.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Literature

Our analysis of young Baltimore residents' responses to questions about the context surrounding Freddie Gray's death is couched in two sociolegal perspectives: critical race theory (CRT) and legal cynicism.

CRT establishes the fundamental role that the law and legal institutions play in the maintenance of constructed racial hierarchies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Despite the promise of neutrality and the installation of allegedly colorblind agendas, the criminal justice system has proven particularly debilitating for Black, Latinx, and indigenous lives and the communities from which they originate (Armenta, 2017; Martín & Danner, 2017; Van Cleve & Mayes, 2015). CRT scholarship suggests that the contemporary "Get Tough on Crime" agenda, and all of the legislation upon which it is bolstered, is sustainable only because of the social construction of race and racism. The traction that racial discrimination maintains in public sentiment serves as justification for the use of force aimed at a disliked population (Provine, 2011). This political agenda creates space for the construction of idealized and demonized subjects (Simon, 2009), many of whom are delineated along racial, ethnic, and cultural lines. Locality and identity emerge quite centrally in these processes, as the law identifies dangerous outsiders from whom the rest of us must be protected.

Contemporary policing practices typify this orientation toward marginalized citizens and the demarcating of risky subjects (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie-Vaughns, & Davies, 2004; Fagan, Braga, Brunson, & Pattavina, 2016; Glaser, 2015; Kahn, Goff, Lee, & Motamed, 2016) and echo a legacy of racialized law enforcement practice (Jones-Brown, 2007). Grounded within a CRT framework, we will illustrate how policing surveillance practices embody hostility toward Black youth, which they see as a matter of structural injustice rather than one derived from personal irresponsibility. Consistent with findings from prior research exploring how these practices erode police–civilian trust and increase doubts about the legitimacy of police institutions (Gau & Brunson, 2015; Tyler, Fagan, & Geller, 2014), the research findings from this current study population will also document the existence of legal cynicism among Baltimore youth.

Legal cynicism is a cultural orientation in which individuals imagine the law unfolding somewhere on the spectrum of irrelevance, to inconvenience, to utterly dismantling (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Kirk, 2016; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). At a minimum, individuals who express cynicism and resentment toward legal institutions may feel somewhat disenfranchised. At the more extreme end of the spectrum, they may feel emboldened to unbind themselves from the obligations of law and order. For at least three reasons presented in existing research, the racial nuance that may exist along this response spectrum merits further investigation. First, when this cynicism emerges in social contexts that are already marked by eroded informal community control mechanisms, crime and violence are more likely to proliferate

(Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Morenoff & Harding, 2014). Second, contemporary sociolegal scholarship suggests that individual-level conceptualizations of law and its significance may vary across groups and can also explain a diverse measure of impressions of citizenship and agency (Berrey, Hoffman, & Nielsen, 2012; Longazel, Parker, & Sun, 2011). Third, studies also indicate that direct experiences with police harassment reduce individual trust in government, with resentment increasing as cumulative interaction (direct and indirect) persists (Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Weaver & Lerman, 2010).

Scholarship that focuses squarely on expressions of legal cynicism among Black Americans (Braga, Winship, Tyler, Fagan, & Meares, 2014; Jones-Brown, 2000; Tyler et al., 2014), and young Black Americans, in particular (Brunson, 2007; Fine et al., 2016; Gau & Brunson, 2015), suggests that faith in legal institutions is significantly dampened by direct and vicarious negative experiences with law enforcement personnel. For example, Brunson and Miller (2006) found that even well-dressed Black youth whose clothing style was more aligned with the White adult middle-class mainstream reportedly attracted unwanted police suspicion for what they believed was the assumption by police that they could only obtain those clothes through some illegal means. Additionally, existing research shows not only that Black civilians' distrust of police officers persists regardless of the officers' race (Brunson & Gau, 2015; Weitzer, 2000), but some studies even corroborate why Black citizens report a heightened fear of Black police officers who they believe will behave more harshly than their White colleagues (Brown & Frank, 2006; Sanga, 2014).

Beyond the interactions that unfold at the individual level, larger meso- and macro-level institutional processes are also implicated in cementing attitudes around distrust and cynicism with police officers who are believed to operate with racial animus. First, parents, elders, and primary caregivers of Black children often feel compelled to teach their young loved ones about whether, when, and how to interact with police officers, as the police officer's role as "civic servant protector" may not be perceived as a given in many Black communities (Bell, 2016; Sewell, Horsford, Coleman, & Watkins, 2016). Second, despite efforts to accommodate marginalized student populations, education personnel are often ill-prepared to help students navigate and reconcile their feelings of oppression (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017). Finally, the increasing presence of School Resource Officers has not been matched by efforts to ensure their pre-paredness to work in educational environments (Kupchik, 2016; McKenna, Martinez-Prather, & Bowman, 2016).

All of these forces once compounded may reduce young Black civilians' capacity to trust police officers and undermine their ability to see themselves as fully respected and valued community citizens. The following is a discussion of Black millennials' ideas of how self-preservation might be achieved in this hostile context, whether it has anything to do with accomplishing respectability performances, and how their deci-sion to opt in or out of meeting those expectations tempers their thoughts on state authority and how social justice is both defined and attained.

Method

Sample

The current study draws on in-depth interviews with a sample of 23 young adults who fit two inclusion criteria: they identified as Black or African American and they either lived in Baltimore City or engaged in some form of community action in the greater Baltimore, MD, region following the death of Freddie Gray. The interviews were conducted in June 2015 in a local public library and at a private office in a centrally located church. Prior to beginning the interview, the research team members outlined the study objectives[5] and assured respondents that they would be compensated $40 (USD) for their involvement.

The sample selection was purposive in nature. Specifically, we used a maximum variation sampling strategy, as it is designed to capture a wide range of perspectives that would reveal a variety of strategies to manage police encounters (Bhattacharya, 2017). We targeted a heterogeneous group of individual protesters and residents of Baltimore who varied across race, gender, and age; thus, yielding a nonprobability sample. In particular, individuals were recruited to participate in the project if they resided in Baltimore City or engaged in some form of community-based action (e.g., protests, rallies, vigils, live tweeting, aid provision to first responders) following the death of Freddie Gray.

Several approaches were used to recruit respondents to participate in the study. First, efforts were made to purposefully recruit from sites that we knew were comprised of young adults, as many of the recent protest movements in Baltimore were initiated by younger activists (Estreet, Wells, Tirmazi, Sinclair, & Nebbit, 2015; White, 2016). Thus, a flyer describing the research project was placed on the first and second authors' Facebook and Twitter accounts and disseminated to social justice and activist networks that are particularly active on social media. The first and second authors also shared the project announcement with prominent Baltimore community members with affiliations in religious institutions, community colleges, and universities and with both newly established and long-standing citizen-led grassroots initiatives. In addition to reaching an array of younger millennials,[6] efforts were made to recruit a diverse array of older respondents of all ages, racial, and ideological backgrounds. For instance, in an attempt to reach Baltimore's older demographic, flyers were posted and distributed at the local public library, which is frequented by many older Baltimore City residents. Second, an invitation to participate in the study was placed in a local newspaper with a broad readership. Finally, community stakeholders with affiliations in religious institutions, higher educational institutions, and grassroots initiatives were also encouraged to invite older adults to participate in the study.

Data collection consisted of digitally recorded in-depth, face-to-face interviews, which lasted approximately 1 hr. The interviews were semi-structured and featured a series of open-ended questions that allowed for considerable probing. Respondents were first asked to describe their reaction to the death of Freddie Gray and the events that transpired following his death. They were then asked about their

experiences with police, as well as their perceptions of police officers' opinions of people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, they were asked about their projections of future outcomes and solutions that would come to pass in the aftermath of Gray's death.[7]

Analytical Strategy

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo for coding. The analytical process of coding involved a number of sequential stages that identified ideas and themes as opposed to counts of explicit words or phrases (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008; Sandelowski, Voils, & Knafl, 2009). That said, this study provides readers with some enumerative guidance on participant response frequencies, where "few" indicates less than five individuals, "many" indicates greater than 6-10 individuals, and "most" represents the majority or greater than 51% of those who offered relevant insights. The coding team included this essay's first and second authors. The coding process began with a list of initial categories derived from the existing policing, CRT, and legal consciousness literature and included such key indicators as procedural justice, harassment, cynicism, citizen trust, profiling, and legitimacy. All emergent themes were coded, which resulted in more than 30 main categories or parent tree nodes (e.g., Black Respectability Politics, community action involvement, perceptions of police officers' attitudes) and more than 100 subcategories used in the coding scheme. The tree node domains helped us organize the transcripts into meaningful segments, but ultimately our conclusions were based on a holistic reading of the interviews in their entirety (Namey et al., 2008), looking for trends in those interviews that were linked to respondents' explanations of their views of the Baltimore Police and the institution's treatment of Black Baltimore residents.

For this study, we have focused exclusively on the testimonies offered by the 68 respondents who self-identified as Black or African American. Of the Black respondents interviewed, 59% were women, 40% were employed full time at the time of the interview, the majority (51%) reportedly earned less than $10,000 in 2014, and all but three respondents lived in Baltimore City for at least 1 year prior to participating in the study. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 86 years old, with a mean age of 46 years and a median of 48.5 years. Of the Black respondents' narratives explored here, 23 study participants were Black millennials, and theirs are the narratives privileged in the discussion below.

Study findings explore Black respondents' conceptualization of Baltimore Police surveillance practices and the responsibility that Black citizens have to protect themselves from unwarranted harassment and violence. As we were particularly interested in how millennials (those born in and after 1980) imagined their coping and avoidance strategies, we refer to those respondents who were 35 years old or younger at the time of the interview as "younger." Those who were 36 years old or greater at the time of the interview in 2015 were classified as "older." The following section includes a discussion of the most common patterns of Black Baltimore millennials' accounts of policing and surveillance management strategies.

Findings and Discussion

By and large, both younger and older Black respondents reported having had direct contact with the BPD in their lifetimes or were at least able to recall and describe a police–civilian encounter that someone close to them had shared. Police contact of some sort was not an uncommon occurrence within their communities. Some reported positive interactions with Baltimore police that included helpful responses to calls about trespassing or vandalism. Others shared more negative encounters that ran the gamut of regular harassment on the part of BPD beat officers, all the way up to sustaining assaultive behavior and aggravated criminal charges stemming from officers' illegal planting of evidence. Many respondents offered that Baltimore City is not an easy place to police and recognized that there are sociostructural deficits that make law enforcement that much more difficult. For example, respondents shared that the absence of jobs, educational programming, and affordable housing complicates efforts toward maintaining informal social order and civic harmony. That said, younger and older respondents agreed that lethal force on the part of local police officers is never a justified method of control. Differentiation in response type arose when we asked *why* they thought BPD officers disproportionately targeted Black Baltimore residents.

Black Criminality

We asked Black respondents across the age range to share their beliefs about Black Baltimore City residents' criminality as well as what they believed Baltimore police officers thought about Black criminality. Across the board, respondents shared that in the eyes of most Baltimore City law enforcement agencies, Black men, women, and children are guilty until proven innocent. Referring to BPD officers, 18-year-old Cassandra unemotionally stated:

> [T]hey view us as a certain stereotype. We're known for dealing drugs, having guns, killing each other and just not being very intelligent people.

Consensus diminished, however, when respondents across the age range were asked about their own perceptions of Black criminality. Both younger and older respondents spoke of disproportionately Black and blighted neighborhoods marked by properties in disrepair, high unemployment rates, concentrated poverty, and relatively high violent criminal activity. Younger respondents were less likely to see residents of these neighborhoods as necessarily criminal, however. Instead, younger respondents distinguished between the criminalized spaces and the criminality (or absence of criminality), among the people living within those spaces.

Many younger and older respondents identified the correlation between concentrated disadvantage and the prevalence of criminal behavior. Younger respondents were more likely to forgive Black residents for committing petty crimes and crimes that were related to drug addiction. They did not commend the commission of these criminal acts. But, instead of naming criminally involved Baltimore residents as

inherently criminal, younger respondents expressed a more empathic understanding of the larger socioeconomic circumstances to which lawbreaking activity should be attributed. Rather than assign individual blame for poor judgment and the consequences that follow poor choices, younger respondents were more likely to frame criminal acts as unfolding in a context of disadvantage and desperation. For example, their position was that drug possession and petty larceny charges were not committed by evil or poorly socialized people. When describing minor property crimes or status offenses, younger respondents argued that those acts were typical of youthful mischief, across race, class, and gender. Again, while not necessarily endorsed, younger respondents characterized more serious felonies, including violent crimes, as the product of structural context just as much, if not more than the product of individual characteristics. For example, when asked whether she believed that Black people are more likely to commit crimes than Whites, Abryann (30 years old) replied:

> I think that we know that African Americans are more disadvantaged in this country and we know that a lot of these crimes are petty crimes, but they're still recognized in the same light as larger crimes. I think that when they try to make this conversation of Black on Black crime, that's illusion. We know our communities are segregated and so it's not uncommon for more crimes to take place among similar groups of people . . . [Y]es, statistic-wise, you're seeing statistics show more crimes taking place among Blacks in America but I also think there are some economic issues at the root of that, that our country doesn't want to really address. Also, we know that the way that they prosecute and sentence and all that stuff is also skewed. So it's really hard to say that Blacks are doing more crimes when you can have people commit the same thing but only certain people are more likely to get into trouble . . . . Remember when basically there was White American, mostly youth, talking about their experiences and like for one incident this girl was illegally driving but it was her and like two other people in the car and maybe they stole some candy from the store, but the only people who got charged, she said, was her Black friends and they let her go home . . . ? They [White youth] were sharing all these little stories of how they've been in similar positions and the fact that they didn't find themselves in trouble.

While not dismissing the illegality of criminal acts committed by Black people, younger respondents were less likely than older respondents to characterize Black people as inherently criminal. Focus was shifted instead to the structural contexts that give rise to crime, problematizing the way those crimes are reported in media outlets, and naming the disparities that exist in identifying and punishing White people's ostensibly similar criminal behavior.

Other younger respondents expressed agitation around the grouping of all Black people beneath one set of negative tropes, as well as the perpetuation of those ideas by respected Black elders and public figures whose sentiments are taken very seriously by White mainstream audiences. Amber, a 30-year-old Black woman, shared her disappointment in state officials' tendency to, and comfort with, characterizing young Black men as "thugs." She acknowledged that the men and women who participated in

looting activities that followed Freddie Gray's funeral were wrong to do so and only fed negative stereotypes of Black Baltimore residents. However, she also made the distinction between those actors and the majority of Black residents who did not behave that way. As not all young Black residents participated in those acts, Amber believed it was not only inaccurate of President Obama to refer to Baltimore residents as "thugs" but also that the term was hurtful and unjustified. Referring to those who stole and destroyed commercial property, she shared:

> I don't know, I think that the police in certain communities view them [young Black men] as "thugs," you know what I'm saying? As the President quoted, which I think was totally inappropriate, you know they call our babies, "thugs." But I think that in certain neighborhoods and stuff it's not a whole bunch of people, you understand? It's the people that are spotlighted in these areas as the troublemakers and stuff like that.

Amber recognized that the looting was unlawful and unproductive. Still, the behavior was committed by a small minority of people whose choices were not representative of the city's Black residents. For political leadership (Baltimore's mayor and the President of the United States) to cavalierly use a term that is so historically racially loaded was unfair in her opinion, and unjustifiably fed preconceived notions about young Black people's persistent criminality and lack of civic commitment.

Personal Responsibility and Black Respectability Politics

While it is not the case that every older Black respondent upheld the merits of Black Respectability and decorum in dress and comportment, not a single Black millennial respondent endorsed those ideals without serious reservation. The majority of older respondents emphasized the importance of public presentation and warned Black citizens "not to give *them* [police officers] a reason" (emphasis added) to cast suspicion. Younger respondents were more concerned with the existence of *them* and the impunity with which they watch, stop, and frisk.

Although Jonathan, at 32 years old, had not directly experienced a negative encounter with a BPD officer, he was well-versed in what he believes are their expectations and described a code of conduct that he hoped would save him if an encounter did escalate. He acknowledged that the goal of a well-executed respectability performance is to neutralize the anxiety and presumption of threat that officers associate with Black Americans. While not suggesting that a polished performance will save your life, Jonathan did offer that "your being Black already" positions those who look like him behind the threshold of automatic acceptance, particularly given that catching a racist, poorly trained officer on a bad day could result in disaster. Still, he hesitated to suggest that wearing fitted pants, walking calmly in broad daylight, or socializing in a "reputable" peer group would keep watchful police officers at bay. Instead, he implored Black citizens to expect that officers need to be managed and to keep exchanges with them respectful and brief:

[If] you argue with them, they might think you're being aggressive . . . People don't always respond the right way. They be in the wrong sometimes . . . "what you stopping me for?" [mimicking Black youth] Like that. That's when the police get mad, most of them. "You gotta respect me because I'm the law." [mimicking BPD] That's how they act.

This strategy is not derived from fear, however. Rather, Jonathan alluded to the idea that police officers' insecurity around Black bodies is only exacerbated by their expectations of Black deference. No matter the outfit, the setting, or the posse, he later argued, any divergence from "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" could cost you your life. This is not an acknowledgment of personal responsibility or an endorsement of Black Respectability Politics, however, and no concessions were made. Jonathan instead outlined a method of risk management and chuckled through the schematics of a subversive means of survival. For youth looking to leverage different mechanisms of resistance, it appears that humoring a sheep in wolf's clothing by allowing him to believe that he has won the match, can be simultaneously obligatory and satisfying.

Legal Cynicism and Legal Socialization

All respondents interviewed expressed deep concern for the future of Baltimore and just about everyone identified the need for a major political regime change. In addition to the operation, policies, and impunity of the BPD, Baltimore City's mayoral and Maryland's gubernatorial administrations were cited as highly problematic. In particular, older respondents called for a swift replacement of the Baltimore City Police Commissioner Anthony Batts and, the Baltimore City Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. Although certainly displeased with Baltimore's political leadership, younger respondents were less likely to propose replacing government officials. Instead, Black millennial respondents expressed a desire to establish a massive restructuring of how the laws are written, neighborhoods are governed, and resources are allocated.

Jerry, 32, was apprehensive about suggesting replacements for city and state government leadership. If another election were to take place, candidates, he argued, would run the same hollow campaign platforms that unsurprisingly to him, never seem to serve Black Baltimore residents. Political reform, he offered, must crystallize far beyond the walls of City Hall and in the institutions that create the conditions for disorder, disenfranchisement, and despair. Jerry shared:

A lot of times people look at what happened and don't focus on the what and don't understand the why . . . [B]ut what I would say is you see a people in pain, a people who feel so disenfranchised. You see people who just feel like there is a systemic plot against them. They feel like everything, all the systems, policies and procedures of policing, of even economic policies, even voting rights policies, feel like these things exist to impede progress in life. The criminal justice system especially . . . some of the crime initiatives of the past were really kind of created to oppress . . .

He went on to specifically describe how criminal justice policy is inherently racist and in need of abolition instead of reform:

> So, it's just a very targeted, strategic approach of populating the jails. This building of million-dollar facilities with, of course, economic benefit to businessmen. This mass incarceration is, I would say, one of the number one things that jumps out to me in gold to increase the prison population. There's benefit, there's profit, there's profiteering off young Black men . . . Baltimore actually has a lot of Black city elected officials, so it's not that we don't know there is a need for more representation that looks like us. But there's a lack of, I would say, options and I feel like the candidates that probably should come forth feel very reluctant to run for these offices because . . . there is a lot of political, I believe, corruption. There's a lot of conflict of interest. This is a very development-driven city [referring to gentrification and the growth of retail-based commercial land use] you know in terms of economic base. A lot of the money, a lot of the affluent and the generating income in the city is geared around tourism and convention, that whole industry; hospitality. So, there's a lot of focus on bringing people to the city, but there's not much focus on serving the city . . . there's so many systems in areas that need overhaul, and focus, and funding.

Jerry and others believe that the construction of a more just Baltimore City requires more than a change in political administration and that business as usual can no longer stand.

Our findings indicate that cynical discussions about what the law can and will provide for Black residents often take place in respondents' homes and include their children. The importance of preparing children to live as morally responsible citizens was emphasized by all. In addition, the significance that the majority of Black respondents placed on teaching children how to behave when interacting with police officers cannot be overstated. Generational membership, however, appears to condition the extent to which respondents attributed negative (or poorly handled) encounters with police to irresponsible parenting. For example, respondents offered mixed assessments of the behavior exhibited by Toya Graham, who was named "Mother of the Year" (Elliott & Reid, 2016) by several media outlets after publicly and violently scolding her son who was present at the Mondawmin Mall riots.[8] For the most part, she was lauded by most of the respondents who commented on her behavior. Older respondents tended to endorse her disciplinary tactics because they deemed her response an example of positive and long overdue supervisory action on the part of absentee Black parents. It was a pleasure for them to see a Black parent stepping in and taking responsibility for her child's poor choices.

In contrast, younger respondents highlighted that Toya Graham's behavior was important not because of a desire to cosign disciplinary violence, but because for a national audience, it typified the urgency that Black parents feel to rescue their children from impending lethal state-sanctioned violence. At 27 years old, Jermaine was able to relate to that mother's fears and shared that he would have understood if his mother reacted the same way:

> That really could've been me, and she has my respect for that because a lot of parents, they won't do that. You know how many parents probably seen their kids down Mondawmin Mall when all that was going on, and didn't grab their kids like that women did? She gets a lot of props for that . . .

Some younger respondents more explicitly explained that Black parents prefer not only that the beating come from them instead of a police officer, but that it serve as enough of a "taste" of rage, that their child will be stunned into self-preservation lest they meet a greater violence at the hands of someone else. While not necessarily impressed by or proud of these parents, millennial respondents recognized the protective (rather than disciplinary) intention animating that action. Steve, 27, plainly stated:

> [A]t the end of the day, you know, she didn't want her son going down a path that was ultimately destructive.

Rather than face what he assumed would be certain arrest, Steve understood Toya Graham's intervention to be a safer response to her son's criminal behavior. An arrest record, he argued, would be far worse and have further reaching implications than a bruised ego.

Conclusion

Black millennials interviewed for this study have clearly declared that they should not have to be perfect in order to live. In fact, they have aptly argued that efforts to accomplish a perfected mainstream, middle-class, White supremacist performance will not save you. While providing a contextual analysis, we argue that state-sponsored violence is bigger than "hem lengths and waistlines," as one millennial cautioned. Moreover, to argue that state-sponsored violence is even remotely correlated with Black citizens' respectability (or its proxy: publicly displayed clothing choice) is an ahistorical claim. For centuries now, Black men, women, and children have been subjected to state officials' beatings, hoses, whips, lynch mobs, and executions—all while adorned in their Sunday best. More importantly, the very suggestion that Black bodies must be dressed in a certain fashion not to guarantee their safety, but only to *improve the odds of their making it home*, underscores the lethal environments that Black citizens must navigate. The larger, more important concern is that public space is not welcoming for Black bodies.

As a result, Black Lives Matter, for example, has emerged as a queer-embracing, politically radical, decentralized movement that celebrates the dignity of the margins. Newer activists are not seeking entrée into a mainstream cultural paradigm that denigrates and stigmatizes their identities. At most, younger community members who are invested in reforming existing systems are challenging the agendas of social institutions that dismantle Black growth and well-being. However, for the majority of action-oriented millennials whose perspectives we shed light on in this study, the

rallying cry and call to fight is one steeped in aspirations for what Taylor (2016) characterizes as liberation from an oppressive neoliberal, patriarchal, capitalist enterprise. We applaud the affirmations offered by this group and are grateful for the momentum that they have stirred. It appears that Black millennial activists diverge from their older counterparts because they have identified a system and framework that cannot be mended—again, the problems are bigger than pant sizes. The call to abolish White supremacy, rather than find a way to fit into it, is unambiguously foregrounded in the new movement. Although the challenges of reform call for more accessible levers than those required for abolition, younger activists have taken up a profoundly difficult mantle. To bear witness in this moment is truly a privilege.

We acknowledge that this study is not without its limitations. For example, a thorough analysis of older Black respondents' thoughts exceeded the scope of this article. We also recognize that despite the richness that qualitative data offer the research community, there is always some degree of measurement error. The demonstration of desirability bias[9] among respondents asked to disclose their engagement in deviant behavior, politically unpopular sentiment, and experiences that might be characterized as traumatic, is expected. Still, we are pleased to make a scholarly contribution that privileges the voices of Black millennial community members, particularly on the heels of an uprising the likes of which we have seen in Baltimore. The dearth of research that explores a disaggregated analysis of race and ethnicity, state violence, and community action must be tackled (for exceptions, see Duran & Pasadas, 2016; Embrick, 2016; Sadler, Correll, Park, & Judd, 2012; Weitzer, 2013), and we intend to highlight the experiences and perspectives of Latinx, Asian, and indigenous and undocumented community members in future studies. Moving forward, we will also follow in the footsteps of other scholars who explore how the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, and health condition methods of civic participation and inform our understanding of how millennials are affected by state-sponsored oppression and privatized surveillance (Sewell, 2017; Sewell, Jefferson, & Lee, 2016; Staggers-Hakim, 2016; Watkins & Maume, 2012). As the struggles confronted by Black community members are not unfolding in isolation, we also need to hear from non-Black neighbors about how their expectations of Black Respectability Politics inform the likelihood of their standing in solidarity with the emerging coalition, as well as whether those contemplations are also shaped by generational membership.

Finally, it is imperative that the state be held accountable to its people. Transformative work must emerge from within, for no meaningfully sustainable steps forward will pass absent that acknowledgment. The need for procedural justice efforts is well-documented, but also misguided at best and distracting at worst. Specifically, these data suggest that an investment in substantive justice, or a committed emphasis on building legally codified fair and just relationships between the state and the people it serves, would be a better focus of our collective energy. We propose that criminal justice reform discourse begin with an interrogation of how police are incentivized to target Black civilians and how fallout from larger arms of the destabilizing state (unaffordable housing, underfunded education, food insecurity, environmental

injustice, suffocating debt, etc.) is implicated in creating the market conditions for state-sponsored violence. A commitment to designing lasting criminal justice reform requires an overhaul of the many structural domains whose quotidian operations undermine Black life. As such, we challenge state entities and the people who must demand more of them, to continue fighting for a thicker, fuller, richer freedom—a reality that is not yet here but is surely possible.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. "Dead Soldiers," *The Wire*, episode 28, directed by Rob Bailey and written by Dennis Lehane, first aired by Home Box Office, Inc., October 3, 2004. *The Wire: The Complete Series* (New York, NY: HBO Video, 2008), Digital Video Disc.
2. David Simon, "*Behind The Wire: David Simon on Where the Show Goes Next*," interview by Meghan O'Rourke, *Slate*, December 1, 2006, www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all/ (retrieved August 28, 2017).
3. A warrantless or "on-view" arrest occurs when a police officer directly witnesses a violation or when a crime is otherwise very quickly solved, eliminating the need for a written arrest warrant from a judge or court commissioner. Baltimore City prosecutors review all such cases before an arrestee is formally charged and maintain the authority to forego formal charging and release an arrested individual, prior to an arraignment before a judge (Collins, 2007).
4. Schools, in particular, exist as deeply influential socialization sites where youth are often exposed to the institutional authority therein, far more than the instructions and cues learned at home, at work, or any other institution that might demand some measure of conformity. As such, the weight of being labeled deviant here (both symbolically and instrumentally) can impose profound implications on students' social trajectories and ability to resist those narratives later in their lives (Baxter & Marina, 2008; Henning, 2017; Shedd, 2015).
5. Prior to giving informed consent, potential respondents read and were told by research team staff: "You are being asked to participate in a research study of community members in Baltimore, MD to determine how the death of Freddie Gray has and continues to affect the community. From this study, the researchers hope to learn your perceptions and experiences with the police before, during, and after Freddie Gray's death, along with why and how you decided to get involved in community action, if at all."
6. Millennials, here, are defined as individuals born after 1980, who have come of age in the wake of neoliberalist social aid retrenchment and the Great Recession of the late 2000s.
7. In the effort to avoid protracted civil litigation, Baltimore City Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, and the city's Board of Estimates unanimously agreed to award Freddie Gray's family with a $6.4 million settlement in September 2015. The settlement covered the City of

Baltimore, the Baltimore City Police Department, and the officers included in wrongful death claims brought by Gray's family. Although Baltimore, MD, State's Attorney, Marilyn Mosby, charged the six officers connected to Gray's detention and van transport with offenses ranging from second-degree depraved-heart murder to manslaughter, reckless endangerment, and misconduct in office, none of the officers were convicted of any of those charges.

8. Following Freddie Gray's funeral on April 27, 2015, police and local residents (many of whom were high school students) began squaring off at 3 p.m. at the Mondawmin Mall in Northwest Baltimore. This confrontation sparked much of the widespread rioting, looting, and arson that later took place throughout the city.

9. Desirability bias is a response bias that emerges when study participants provide inaccurate answers to researchers, in effort to present themselves in what they believe will be a more favorable light (Hart-Johnson, 2017).

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