

Prologue

When blackness, black human life, and the conditions imposed upon it enter discussions . . . what does this then do to those very discussions?

Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015)

Run!

During the small hours of February 1, 1942, on Baltimore, Maryland's thriving Black entertainment corridor along Pennsylvania Avenue, a group of people gathered around a young Black man and urged him to flee from a police officer. The man—twenty-six-year-old Thomas Broadus—was a soldier from Pittsburgh stationed at Fort George G. Meade in Maryland after being drafted into the army in 1941. That night in Baltimore, he had attended a Louis Armstrong performance with three companions.

Following the performance, Broadus and his group were stopped by white police officer Edward Bender. Their “crime” was attempting to hail an unlicensed, Black-operated taxi. Bender demanded that Broadus's group seek service from a white-owned taxi company instead. Broadus protested this police interference, arguing that he “wanted a colored cab and had a right to spend his money with whomever he chose” (*Afro-American* 1942). In response, Bender apprehended Broadus and began beating him with his nightstick.

Get away!

Broadus initially managed to break loose of Bender's wrath with the support of the crowd. Through radical feminist acts of care, several women helped free Broadus from the blows Bender wielded with his nightstick. One woman even took off her shoe to use it to beat the police officer (*Afro-American* 1942). With significant injuries inflicted by Bender's nightstick,

Broadus was only able to walk, not run, away from his attacker. While Broadus struggled to take steps away from Bender, the officer shot him in the back. Reeling from the pain of being shot, Broadus then tried to take cover under a nearby parked car. As he crouched down, however, Bender shot Broadus in the back a second time and compounded the injury of the gunshot wounds by repeatedly kicking Broadus. When some witnesses volunteered to transport Broadus to a hospital, Bender threatened to shoot them as well (Y. Williams 2015). Thomas Broadus was ultimately placed in a police car and taken to the city's only Black-serving hospital, where he was pronounced dead five minutes after being admitted.

Edward Bender was initially charged with murder and later found not guilty by a grand jury (Baum 2010). The jury reversed its decision to indict after meeting with the Baltimore police chief. An official statement from Bender's police captain justified Bender's use of excessive force with claims that Thomas Broadus had grabbed Bender's nightstick and struck the officer with it several times on the head before running away (*Afro-American* 1942). The statement also claimed that Bender's first shot that night was fired in the air and that he only fired one shot at the soldier, despite the hospital staff finding two bullet entry wounds in Broadus's body among the other injuries inflicted by Bender (*Afro-American* 1942). Bender was never prosecuted (Baum 2010). This was his second killing; he had killed a twenty-four-year-old Black man named Charles Parker in 1940 (*Afro-American* 1942).

In the wake of Thomas Broadus's murder, a group of about two thousand Black protesters marched to the Maryland state capitol at Annapolis on April 23, 1942, to demand an end to police brutality. Speaking on behalf of the protesters, W. A. C. Hughes Jr., attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a leader of the Citizens' Committee for Justice, denounced the routine police violence in Baltimore.¹ He argued that "liberty, the pursuit of happiness and even life itself is seriously jeopardized in the city of Baltimore by the totally indifferent and frequently oppressive action by police officers." He went on to point out that since Baltimore police commissioner Robert F. Stanton took office in 1938, "there have been ten killings of colored citizens by policemen." Hughes cautioned that "a serious racial conflict may result unless some remedial steps are taken."

It is telling that the "remedial steps" laid out presaged the types of reforms suggested today when police killings occur. For example, Hughes called for "a full and complete investigation" of police abuse charges by "a

special committee of outstanding citizens” appointed by the governor. In addition, believing that racial diversity in police departments would help bring an end to police brutality, protesters requested that Black police officers be hired in Baltimore. Along those lines, the Reverend Eugene W. White, secretary of the Citizens’ Committee for Justice and pastor of Providence Baptist Church in Baltimore, stated: “One of the greatest needs of our racial group in Baltimore is colored policemen in uniform to assist in upholding the laws, preventing crime and running down criminals. Baltimore has only three colored policemen who are not, and never have been in uniform.”² Other requests included the appointment of a “colored magistrate” in Baltimore and the hiring of a second policewoman to the Baltimore police force. Protesters’ demands also addressed much broader needs for more employment opportunities and Black representation in state and local government (Shoemaker 1994).

As a routinely unimaginative conclusion of highly contested police cases, a committee was formed. During the twentieth century, committees and commissions on race and civil rights became a common institutional response in the United States to quell Black rebellion without resolving its root causes (Hinton 2021). The April 1942 demonstration in Annapolis, along with meetings with Black leaders, prompted Maryland governor Herbert R. O’Conor to appoint an interracial commission “to study problems affecting Maryland’s Negro population,” including police relations (Governor’s Commission on Problems Affecting the Negro Population 1943). After convening for months, the subcommittee on problems involving the police recommended the following:

- 1 That a copy of the Commission’s report on “Questions Affecting the Police” be sent to the State’s Attorney with the request that the Bender case be again sent to the Grand Jury.
- 2 That a copy also be sent to the Commissioner of Police with the request that appropriate charges against Officer Bender be formulated and tried by the Commissioner in his authority as head of the force.
- 3 That the Commissioner of Police appoint a colored police woman at an early date.
- 4 That one or more of the Negro policemen on the force be assigned to the duty of patrolmen in uniform.
- 5 That worthy young colored men be encouraged to prepare themselves to pass the examination and to secure places on the eligible lists.

- 6 That an amendment of the law relating to the Board of Police Examiners be sought, so as to secure the appointment of non-partisan examiners with long tenure in office.

(Governor's Commission on Problems Affecting the Negro Population 1943)

Following these suggestions, the Baltimore police department appointed the city's first three uniformed Black police officers (Y. Williams 2015). By 1950, Baltimore's police department had hired fifty Black police officers (Baltimore City Police Department, n.d.). Other reforms made in Maryland since then to combat racial police violence include diversity hires in police departments across the state beginning in the 1950s, community policing initiatives beginning in the 1980s to encourage police officers to become more familiar with their enforcement areas and collaborate with local residents to prevent and target crime, a 1995 agreement by the Maryland State Police (MSP) to end racial profiling (following a class-action lawsuit brought against MSP by the American Civil Liberties Union), a 2001 law requiring racially disaggregated data collection on traffic stops in Maryland, and a 2009 law requiring Maryland law enforcement agencies to report data on their use of Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams.

From the 1943 Governor's Commission to today, however, the State of Maryland and City of Baltimore have failed to resolve the issue of police violence. A case in point is the widely publicized and protested death of Freddie Gray on April 19, 2015. The murder of Freddie Gray occurred just days before the seventy-third anniversary of the protests surrounding the police killing of Thomas Broadus. Gray's death was the result of coordinated violence by six Baltimore police officers who, similar to the officer who killed Thomas Broadus, were either acquitted or had the charges against them dropped before going to trial.

In addition to the parallel between such tacit acceptances of police brutality spanning more than seven decades, there is commonality in the method of struggle taken up by Broadus and Gray. Like Broadus, Freddie Gray ran from the police when he was stopped. Possibly with his mind flashing through memories of his past arrests, Gray took flight with another man after a police officer made eye contact with them (*Baltimore Sun* 2015). These shared moments of Black flight across time are a central focus of this book. What happens when we understand the stories of Thomas Broadus and Freddie Gray not only for the losses of Black life they tell but also for the kinds of "life and living memory and whatever is in between"

(McKittrick 2021, 106) that emerge out of Black flight from policing? How can a retelling of police brutality through the framework of Black flight serve not as a descriptive rehearsal of anti-Black violence but instead as a lens into how we can “live with our world, differently, right now and engender new critical interventions” (McKittrick 2021, 139)? These questions mark a critical departure from the inertia characterizing the policy arena surrounding policing, wherein the prevailing queries already assume policing to be an answer to the “problem” (Du Bois [1903] 2015) of Black people and Black geographies.

Typical of this inertia, some of the same steps and policy recommendations made following the 1942 killing of Thomas Broadus were put forward in the wake of Freddie Gray’s murder. For example, the Maryland Senate president and House speaker created a Public Safety and Policing Workgroup in May 2015 to address issues of policing following Gray’s death. Similar to the Governor’s Commission on Problems Affecting the Negro Population organized in 1942, this work group recommended that recruitment standards be evaluated and modernized to increase the presence of women, African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities in law enforcement departments (Hughes, Gruber, and Rossmark 2016). This call echoed demands for more racial and gender diversity on the Baltimore police force seven decades prior. But as the racial and gender backgrounds of the police officers responsible for Gray’s murder make clear, diversity cannot resolve the issue of police brutality: three of the six officers were Black, one of whom was a woman.³ The State of Maryland, like the rest of the United States, has proven unwilling to turn away from ineffective, stale reforms in efforts to address police violence. The long appeal of police reform reflects enduring institutional priorities across the political spectrum to legitimize the police function in enforcing the inequality and oppression integral to the development and maintenance of racial capitalism in the United States (Center for Research on Criminal Justice 1977; Maher 2021).

The state’s responses to the police killings of Thomas Broadus, Freddie Gray, and the countless others whose lives have ended at the hands and weapons of police officers in the United States are deeply inadequate. Rather than quelling the violent operations of the police state, reforms set forward often focus on suppressing the fire of Black rebellion through crisis and diversity management. In addition, solutions presented for the problem of police brutality routinely involve deeper entrenchment of police presence in communities; for example, some community policing reforms even include incentives for officers to live in the areas they police. These liberal

reform approaches incorrectly “identify policing as a fundamental tool of law and order that serves the collective interests of society, and locate the problems of police in a failure to adhere to constitutional law” (Akbar 2018, 410). The consequences of this reformism include ongoing state and state-sanctioned racial violence. Instead of further investments in policing, what is needed is a turn to “nonreformist reform,” which Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains as “changes that, at the end of the day, unravel rather than widen the net of social control through criminalization” (2007, 242).

In the pages that follow, I present a Black geographic history of non-reformist approaches to combatting police violence. The places where I have gathered histories and present-day stories of such approaches are rooted in the same type of defiance called for by the crowd gathered around Thomas Broadus on that winter night in 1942 and carried out by Freddie Gray in 2015: Black flight. Moreover, while it is unknown whether Louis Armstrong learned that Thomas Broadus lost his life to a police officer that night after his performance in Baltimore, Armstrong himself sang of flight from police later in his career:

Pops, did you hear the story of long John Dean?
A bold bank robber from Bowlin' Green
Was sent to the jail house yesterday
But late last night he made his getaway . . .
While they offered a reward to bring him back
Even put bloodhounds on his track
Those doggone bloodhounds lost his scent
Now nobody knows where John went
(Louis Armstrong, “Long Gone”)

Louis Armstrong’s lyrics, onlookers’ exhortations for Thomas Broadus to flee in 1942, and Freddie Gray’s flight from police in 2015 all demonstrate that policing is a deadly force from which to escape, not a system to invest hope and resources in correcting. Such refusals of policing invite a new type of analysis that does not simply interrogate the most brutal excesses of state power but instead points toward a way out of quotidian state violence by centering radical possibilities embedded in struggles for Black life.

While this prologue centers the historical geography of Black flight in Baltimore, the book now pivots to Montgomery County, Maryland—an equally important geographic site about forty miles from Baltimore and nestled against the northwestern boundary of the US capital, Washington, DC. At the same time that critical struggles against police brutality in

major cities like Baltimore have shaped much of the police reform debate in the past century, Black geographies at other scales and places pose significant geographic confrontations with and possibilities beyond state and extralegal racial violence. We can locate Montgomery County in a diaspora that includes the nearby city of Baltimore along with other places formed through Black flight and placemaking. Within this diasporic framework for Black struggle, expanded scalar and political potentials result from engaging and recognizing places like Montgomery County: “spaces that are not normally celebrated—or even noticed—in our present geographic order” (McKittrick 2021, 182).

Alongside Thomas Broadus and Freddie Gray, who attempted to save their lives by fleeing from police, the people whose stories have shaped my writing carry a Black geographic tradition of flight that informs their organizing against and outside police surveillance and control. Their stories—and their accomplices in flight—reveal fissures in the law enforcement apparatus as well as everyday strategies of care and fugitivity that refuse, disrupt, and elude policing. It is my hope that these strategies help the reader imagine how safety can and must be ensured without police.