



2021

The Burden of Public Blackness and the Promise of Black Privacy

Adeyemi Doss
Indiana State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview>

Recommended Citation

Doss, Adeyemi (2021) "The Burden of Public Blackness and the Promise of Black Privacy," *The North Meridian Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.7825/2769-5115.1039

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview/vol2/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The North Meridian Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

The Burden of Public Blackness and the Promise of Black Privacy

Adeyemi Doss

Abstract

This essay explores the impact of being Black in private (i.e., black privacy) to shield the black body from the taxing nature of being black in public (i.e. public blackness). Deriving from the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmad Arbery, I offer an existential description of how the black body is perceived in public blackness, and the direction black privacy must follow for black people to sustain a sense of self. This essay also connects public blackness to a long-standing societal practice of restricting the movement of black people's bodies, which arises from anti-black ideologies that see the black body as a problem rather than a human being.

Introduction:

Horrendous images of lifeless black bodies flash through my mind like a nightmare, preceded by a constant stream of screams and cries of protest. On May 7, 2020, I watched the first viral video of twenty-five-year-old Ahmad Arbery being chased and killed by three white men while jogging near his home. I felt a wave of dread and anxiety wash over me while at the same time wishing he could flee the ferocious appetite of his killers. On May 25, 2020, Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, was caught on camera pinning George Floyd to the pavement for 9 minutes and 29 seconds with a knee to his throat, causing Mr. Floyd to die due to lack of oxygen to the brain. I was sitting on my couch the day Floyd was murdered, watching him take his last breath while he cried out for his mother, wishing he was able to sink into the asphalt and then resurface when it was safe for him to be visible again. As part of a drug trafficking investigation, Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove of the Louisville Metro Police Department forced their way into Breonna Taylor's home on

March 13, 2020, killing her as she slept in her bed. I could not help but wonder what would happen if Breonna was able to fade into the night, only to return when it was safe to do so.

For months I have watched their dead bodies be recycled in the media, become focal points of mass demonstrations, and serve as a stark reminder to any black person in America of their social status as bodies placed “outside of the world of moral concern.”¹ In light of the tragic deaths of Arbery, Floyd, Taylor, and countless others, I am forced to question my life as a black father, husband, son, and scholar living in a predominantly white community with a history of anti-Black violence, while asking the seemingly impossible questions:

What if the black body could be liberated from a society that considers it as something to be policed, despised, distorted, and erased? What happens when the black body is no longer reduced to the level of the flesh and can break free from being stuck in an ontological space I refer to as public blackness, where it exists only as a feared object? What does a black body have to go through to be recognized and accepted as a human being? I ask these questions in private while I try to come to terms with the fear and anxiety evoked by depictions of black people’s pain and death. In a state of isolation (i.e., black privacy), I can envision a world where the body I see and breathe from is no longer a danger or threat to society but rather a body free to coexist peacefully with other bodies.

As a response, these barriers refer to the paradox of the black body living in two worlds, which occurs when black people find themselves roaming across white social spaces, the white imagination, and the visual field of the white gaze, all of which have been conditioned to see black bodies as a problem (the terms “white gaze” and “white imagination” will be used interchangeably with “cultural gaze” and “gaze of white supremacy” within the body of this essay).

¹ David William Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Context and Contemporary Manifestations of Radical Dynamics*, ed. George Yancy and Janine Jones (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2013), 18.

Being a black man in America has meant fighting a seemingly endless battle against a society that only sees one as a criminal. I began to find emotional relief in the concept of black privacy as a means of avoiding the thought of my mortality. I find myself drawn to places where I am isolated in my attempt to cope with the deaths of Arbery, Floyd, and Taylor, the infectious wrath of COVID-19, as well as the troubling reality that being black in an anti-Black society means continuously facing violence and physical death, as well as a social death that becomes increasingly interwoven with one's life experience. Therefore, black privacy becomes a way of survival and a way of life.

What is Black Privacy?

Before I go any further, I would like to explain how I use the concepts of black privacy and public blackness in my work. Black privacy is, first and foremost, a means of mental defiance against American society's concerted disregard for black people's humanity. This, I contend, derives from a collective perspective and imagination socially conditioned to see and imagine the black body as a threatening object. As a result, black privacy for black people becomes an intrapsychic battle that can be interpreted as the body's attempt to avoid becoming psychologically or physically victimized and as a desire to avoid being treated as a problem rather than a human being.

Within the notion of black privacy, the fear of being perceived as a problem drives some black people to question their existence in a specific space or in society. This phenomenon can cause some black people to question what it means to be publicly visible as a racial body and raise concerns about society's failure to recognize black people's humanity. When we bring into question race relations in the United States, according to George Yancy in his 2008 book *Black Bodies, White Gaze: The Continuing Significance of Race*, many whites have been socialized to "see the Black body through the medium of

historically organized types of information that treat it as an object of suspicion.”² Black people and their bodies, become “a prisoner of an image—an elaborate distorted image of the Black, an image whose reality is held together through white bad faith and projection that is ideologically orchestrated to leave no trace of its social and historical construction.”³ For decades, black people have had to battle and “proactively create themselves” to survive the burdensome nature of anti-Black violence, oppression, and hypervisibility, along with America’s methods of policing black people’s bodies.⁴ The concept of black privacy in reference to my reflection of my existence in a society where being seen as a problem becomes a reality in that I must frequently struggle against the domination of a cultural gaze; my ultimate fight becomes a fight to live. I will go into greater detail about America’s carceral effect by first looking at the historical context of lynching as a way of policing the bodies of black men and boys and its relationship to current issues of black masculine body confinement.

What is Public Blackness?

The complex nature of public blackness operates as an ontological sphere when the black body is present. In public blackness, black people and their bodies encounter a cultural gaze and imagination that it seeks to suppress as it moves about in a specific space or in society. Black people are confronted and more so haunted with the fear of being stereotyped in public. External features of blackness and black bodies (such as flesh, hair texture and color, body size, and eye color) are often stereotyped, influencing people’s racial experience(s). According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*,

One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with sex) is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about who a person is. This fact is made

² George Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2008), 3.

³ Ibid., 110.

⁴ Ibid., 117

painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example, racially mixed or of an ethnic/racial group we are not familiar with. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning.⁵

In public blackness, I argue that black people’s racial experience is not so much a fleeting crisis of racial meaning as it is, for some, a permanent component of the way they experience life as a racial body. “Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure,” Omi and Winant go on to claim. Comments such as “Funny, you don’t look black” betray an underlying image of what black should be. We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities; indeed, we become disoriented when they do not.”⁶ The way the black body and blackness are seen and imagined is directly linked to the flawed idea(s) of what and how black people are and should act. Thus, blackness becomes the pit of human life under the ideology of anti-blackness, the racial sense of what it means to be black in a racialized society where race is used as a social marker. As a result, blackness is also seen as the “underside of humanism, the consequence of humanism” in which those who appear to exist in blackness can be “alienated, and exiled” at any time.⁷ To comprehend the impact of public blackness on the lives of black people, we must first consider how the collective gaze views blackness and the consequences of being caught in the gaze.

In public blackness, the black body is trapped in the visual cortex of a cultural gaze that has been conditioned to see it as something other than human. It is worth noting that the gaze’s visual field is the ontological anatomy of public blackness. Therefore, public blackness strongly relies on the gaze to regulate the movement of black people. It is not just the look (i.e., gaze) that causes problems for the Black body engrossed in its visual field while in public; it is also what is behind the look that

⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ William David Hart, “Constellations: Capitalism, AntiBlackness, Afro-Pessimism, and Black Optimism,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2018): 20.

causes problems for the Black body engrossed in its visual field (i.e., the imagination). What then is the connection between the Black body, the white gaze, and imagination? In an anti-Black society, how are Black people's bodies conceptualized?

The Black Body as a Problem

*"When you're young and you're Black, no matter how you look you fit the description. You fit the description of the nonbeing, the being out of place, and the noncitizen always available to and for death."*⁸

-Christina Sharpe

When considering the "problem" of the Black body, we must interrogate the questions posed by two critics. W. E. B. Du Bois raises the question of the phenomenology of Black experience by asking, "How does it feel to be a problem?"⁹ Ronald L. Jackson III asks about the cultural production of this experience of marginalization, inquiring, "How did Black bodies become a problem in the first place?"¹⁰ According to Jackson, "the social assignment of Black bodies to an underclass is a historical conundrum that has multiple origins, two of which are the institutions of slavery and the mass media."¹¹ Throughout the historical development of "Black body politics," "Black bodies were inscribed with a set of meanings, which help perpetuate the scripter's racial ideology."¹² Those meanings have remained to disturb every phase of Black life in America. The system of white supremacy inscribes a set of meanings onto Black people's corporeality that impedes their spatial mobility in society. The scripting of the Black body and Black body politics have often unveiled the "embedded racially xenophobic tendencies that are redistributed and recycled in mass-media cultural

⁸ Christina Sharp. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 86.

⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: 100th Anniversary Edition* (Boulder: Paradigm Publisher, 2004), 1.

¹⁰ Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

practices.”¹³ The Black body steadily struggles not to capitulate to the mental and physical stress produced by these public Blackness practices that construct it as a problem. David Polizzi reminds us in his *Social Presence, Visibility, and the Eye of the Beholder: A Phenomenology of Social Embodiment*, reflecting on the killing of Trayvon Martin,

that the Black body continues to be constructed as the manifestation of social threat and danger. As such, the contours of these constructed fears are not only present within the visibility of the physical body, but also come to represent a type of geographical demarcation or territorialization whereby the Black body may be “legitimately” presented as a problematic body...Trayvon Martin’s killing represents not only the way in which his killer constructed the meaning of his presence, but the way in which the social context of that presenting was employed by him to further “justify” the legitimacy of this construction.¹⁴

The concept of public Blackness is extremely complex when considering how the Black body is constructed in public as a problem. In the battle against this racialized paradigm that portrays the Black body as a problem often used to justify its abuse, the significance of Black privacy offers a type of ontological space where Black people can reinvent themselves. In the reinvention of *self*, Black privacy transforms into a survival mechanism, driving the body and the mind to disengage from the perception of being perceived as a problem. In a racialized society, Black people have had to fight and constantly create themselves to survive.¹⁵ Black people live in a world that is warped with distortions of their reality. For some Black people, experiencing public Blackness is akin to experiencing a kind of social death, where one becomes vulnerable in losing sight of one’s own identity. It is also the psychological experience of confronting the possibility of dying. This is due to the same misconceptions that have helped create the Black body as a problem and, consequently, have contributed to its degradation and continued abuse.

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ David Polizzi, *Social Presence, Visibility, and the Eye of the Beholder: A Phenomenology of Social Embodiment* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2013), 174.

¹⁵ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 117.

In contemporary America, Black males, for example, are both seen and imagined “as inherently violent, irresponsible, and angry street urchins.”¹⁶ Unlike his counterpart [the white male], his body is often scripted as a young, innocent, and immature individual.”¹⁷ Thus, for Black men and boys the probability of facing violence is a part of everyday existence.

As Tommy Curry argues, “The demonization, social marginalization, and extermination of Black males, specifically heterosexual Black males, is among the most long-standing practice of white America’s patriarchal regime.”¹⁸ Conversely, this long-standing practice has a profound impact on the lives of Black men and boys, leading some to turn inward to cope with the mental and physical anxiety and fatigue imposed by public Blackness.

When I consider my own experience as a Black man traveling in spaces occupied by my white peers, I become more mindful of my body schema. I am fighting the urge not to fit into the scripter’s prose as something to be feared now that I am conscious of the possibilities that lie ahead. Now that I have seen what being feared can do to the Black body when it is engulfed in public Blackness, I am wary about being trapped inside the visual field of the cultural gaze. Consequently, countless people who resemble me have died. To avoid death, both physically and mentally, is to avoid society’s distortions of my body as well as the control that whiteness tries to maintain through my death. I seek ways to escape public Blackness (i.e., being Black in public) by practicing Black privacy in my way of physically moving about in the world.

My thoughts are largely focused on how my body, like the bodies of other Black men and boys, evokes fear in white America. The fear that my body is encased in becomes so intense that I

¹⁶ Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, 82.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Tommy J. Curry, “Killing Boogeymen: Phallicism and the Misandric Mischaracterizations of Black Males in Theory,” *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 2 (2018): 247. <https://www.doi.org/10.11612/resphil.1612>.

seriously wonder if the problem is with my body or the outer tones of my skin. As a response, I am forced to consider both my skin color and the meaning of Blackness in a racially divided society, where both are fundamental to America's values, morality, and expectations that people of African descent are intrinsically inferior and irredeemable. For those reasons alone, I am inclined to reject the notion that Blackness, Black people, and Black bodies are wretched, regardless of where or how they exist. In a society that sees you as a threat, Black privacy, however intangible it might seem, is all you have.

White Fear and the Gaze of White Supremacy

"When I grabbed him [Michael Brown, the unarmed eighteen-year-old young Black boy], the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan.... When he looked at me, he made like a grunting, like aggravated sound and he starts, he turns and he's coming back towards me,... His first step is coming towards me, he kind of does like a stutter step to start running. When he does that, his left hand goes in a fist and goes to his side, his right one goes under his shirt in his waistband and he starts running at me...He was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting him," Wilson said. "And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way." This is where Wilson focused his shot placement at Brown's head, killing the unarmed teen. "I remember his feet coming up... and then they rested."¹⁹

-Ex-officer Darren Wilson

On the day Michael Brown Jr. was shot and killed, August 9, 2014, I was left wondering if the fear that often encompasses the Black body generates a desire to destroy it wherever it resides. Yancy emphasizes that "killing the Black body is an act that functions to provide the white body with an omnipotent consciousness, giving whites the illusion of absolute power to take a Black life."²⁰ We see and hear the destructive dynamics of white fear that have transformed into a type of cultural fear that was carried out in Darren Wilson's horrific imaginative fantasy depicted above, especially when the Black masculine body is deemed a threat or out of place.

¹⁹ Darren Wilson, Grand Jury testimony, *Washington Post*, Nov. 26, 2020. [Please provide an article title (and an author, if available)]

²⁰ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 116.

The practice of Black privacy is also a response to the physical and metaphysical containment and violent nature in public Blackness and America's carceral systems that treat Black people as nonhuman. Fear of the Black masculine body must exist to rationalize policing it to death through the hegemony of the white gaze. For this reason, the Black body must be always controlled by those who benefit from what is often referred to as white-supremacist power structures. Public Blackness is a metaphysical extension of both the systems of slavery and Jim Crow in reference to their carceral aim against Black people.²¹ Like the systems of slavery and Jim Crow, public Blackness creates a "carceral reality" where Black people are constantly in conversation with the demoralizing distortions of their presence in the world and with how their bodies are controlled at every stage of their existence.²² These distortions frequently arise from how the gaze of white supremacy apprehends Black bodies. The gaze of white supremacy views Black people as foreign objects that are not to be trusted and are inherently criminal or deviant. The gaze functions within the realm of public Blackness at the individual gaze level or the social gaze. Both, one could argue, have been bombarded with anti-Black ideologies that dehumanize the presence of the Black body.

When trying to understand the cynical connotations ascribed to the Black body, we must also consider how Blackness or the darkness of one's flesh, and the fear that ensues, generates an unsettling sense of understanding how society views one's presence in the world for Black people (i.e., corporeal politics). Blackness in an anti-Black society "encompasses both Black people and the being of Black people."²³ The gaze of white supremacy identifies Black bodies as a danger to white society. Some Black people become *hypervigilant* about the gaze. Most Black people have a collective understanding of the inner functions of white fear, particularly when that fear is projected onto their bodies.

²¹ Jason M. Williams, "Race as a Carceral Terrain: Black Lives Matter Meets Reentry," *Prison Journal* 99, no. 4 (May 2019): 390. <https://www.doi.org/10.117/0032885519852062>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hart, "Dead Black Man, Just Walking," 94.

White fear, as Eddie Glaude Jr. explains, “is the general frame of mind that Black people are dangerous, not only to white individuals because they are prone to criminal behavior, but to the overall well-being of our society.”²⁴ Glaude argues that “such fears can produce cycles of racial moral panic in which Black people are viewed as a threat to everything we [white society] hold dear.”²⁵ The notion of white fear when concerning the existence of Black bodies and Black people becomes “something anticipatory, a fear just waiting to be expressed.”²⁶ One must consider that public Blackness—the very presence of Black people in public—can propel acts of violence.²⁷ For instance, when the Black body finds itself enmeshed within public Blackness, it provokes an anguishing sense of vulnerability to white bodies. This often depends on how the gaze positions the Black body in specific communal spaces. In public, the Black body lacks the freedom to experience its existence without compromising with anti-Black connotations imputed to its flesh by the white gaze.

Taylor, Floyd, and Arbery all died in 2020 as a result of the same fear that killed Brown in 2014. Fear has been assigned the task of destroying and containing the Black body, which is seen as a problem rather than a human.

²⁴ Eddie Glaude Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Broadway Books, 2017), 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Escaping America's System of Punishment

*"From slaves codes to Black codes to segregation laws to the codes of color-blind racism, Black people have been constructed by an incarcerating -and- carceral gaze."*²⁸

-William David Hart

The Black body "lives in Absence," argues Lewis R. Gordon.²⁹ Whenever the Black body is present or converts from "Absence to Presence," it "poses a threat to the precarious balance of reality for white bodies that are already present and therefore poses no such threat except, perhaps, in his absence."³⁰ The relationship between the perception and policing of Black bodies works to eradicate anything that jeopardizes white society. For instance, the hegemonically repressed history of lynching in America, which white-supremacist power structures have virtually tried to erase from public memory, presents a context for understanding the brutish nature of how the Black bodies are policed today. Lynching in America—concerning Black people's historical presence, especially that of Black men and boys—spoke volumes to the edifice of white anti-Black behavior. The fear of Black men and boys, both historically and today, has been employed to suppress, profit from, manipulate, and eliminate what is regarded as the most vulnerable threat to society: the Black masculine body. The essence of white fear in a racialized society "is a kind of political fear."³¹ For Black men and boys, this specific fear was frequently induced by the emphatic beliefs held by white America "about who they are and about what they're capable of."³² The perception of "who they were" was brought about by fraudulent claims that Black people were inferior, and "what they were" capable of was often imagined in terms of the Black phallus threatening white women's bodies. After emancipation, the ferocity of white fear, especially about the Black man's sexual yearning for the flesh of white women, was used

²⁸ Hart, "Dead Black Man, Just Walking," 94.

²⁹ Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (New Brunswick: Humanities Press, 1995), 100.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

³¹ Glaude, *Democracy in Black*, 74.

³² *Ibid.*

to justify the uncontrollable terror all through the southern region of the United States. The aspiration to prove that Black people, in particular males, were uncivilized and brutish shifted into an obsession for many white Americans. According to Ronald Jackson II, it was indoctrinated into the social consciousness of the Deep South that the Black man's primary objective "was raping white women."³³ Jackson also argues that "the Black body of the brute was scripted to be nothing less than an indiscreet, devious, irresponsible, and sexually pernicious beast."³⁴ As Rasul Mowatt argues, "lynchings of Black Americans were done to curb the *Black savage* (emphasis added) and protect the sanctity of white womanhood."³⁵

The false impression that Black people were racially inferior permeated the white press and the vestibules of the "ivory towers" of America's colleges and universities. From the Eurocentric religious fabrication of the "noble savage" to the philosophical and scientific myths of racial inferiority, the Black body stands at the center of the historical discourse around race and racism in America. The violence that followed the mythical social labeling of Black people's bodies and, in particular, Black men and boys, is one phenomenon that remains to taint the social and political makeup of America. According to data collected by the Equal Justice Initiative, between the years 1877 and 1950 more than 4,875 Black people died by lynching.³⁶ This particular era in American history tends to be ignored and is the least understood.

Lynching was an accepted practice utilized to dictate the Black community and the Black body and is the precursor to the modern criminal justice system in the United States. According to Donald

³³ Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, 41.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Rasul A. Mowatt, "Lynching as Leisure: Broadening Notions of a Field," *American Behavior Scientist* 56, no. 10 (Oct. 2012): 1367. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0002764212454429>.

³⁶ "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," Equal Justice Initiative, <https://eji.org/racial-justice/legacy-lynching>.

L. Grant, lynching was “a practice which first appeared in America during the colonial period.”³⁷ This practice was the most practical way of “maintaining the racial cast system which developed after Reconstruction.”³⁸ Lynching was so prevalent in America that it “was considered a proper precursor to the establishment of legally constituted courts.”³⁹ According to George Fredrickson, lynching was “a way of using fear and terror to check dangerous tendencies in a Black community considering to be ineffectively regimented or supervised.”⁴⁰ The history of lynching in America, as Jonathan Markovitz asserts, has “provided a lens or a way of seeing and understanding contemporary relations and spectacles of racialized violence.”⁴¹ The nature of lynching as a public spectacle compels us to severely consider the evolution of the white gaze and its role in dehumanizing and criminalizing the Black body. If we turn our attention to lynching photographs and the consequence of publicness as it pertains to Black bodies, we are then forced to understand the need for Black privacy. One could argue that lynching photos are America’s cartouches of the past. Lynching photographs speak a loud language of silence. Traces of darkness detach the contorted human figure from the background of the bleached-out faces and create a three-dimensional appearance that draws the reader. Most lynching photographs display a wide range of Black shades that offer life to the lifeless. Even though the victims were not seen as human, to us as readers, they are more human than those surrounding them. According to Mowatt, lynching photographs were “created to reflect the ideology of white superiority through Black subjugation.”⁴² The disfiguration of Black bodies was a performance that symbolized

³⁷ Donald L. Grant, *The Anti-Lynching Movement: 1883–1932* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975), 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press), 272.

⁴¹ Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 67.

⁴² Mowatt, *Lynching as Leisure*, 1367

the communal domination and restraint of the Black body. This history forms the foundation of state-sanctioned violence against Black people in the 21st century. Such sadism at one time was deemed a justifiable way of administering the law. David Garland emphasizes that it becomes rather challenging when interpreting something so gruesome as “legitimate actions.”⁴³ This can be due to how we construe the body expressions, dress, and positions of the spectators and presumed executioners. Mowatt reminds us that even though lynching was a form of vigilante justice, it was also a practice of leisure. He writes, “Race, race relations, racism, and racial violence are elements that could be seen through viewing and reading lynching as a historical form of leisure.”⁴⁴ The normality of lynching was “distinctly American as baseball games and church suppers.”⁴⁵

One could further argue that lynching photographs were symbolic representations of the *anti-Black gaze*, in which white subjects generally viewed black subjects as objects to be feared and controlled, even to death. To be the receiver of such fear, especially during the post-emancipation era, was to grapple with the *Other's* fear of one's existence. The Black body at the focal point of lynching campaigns was hauled into the fetishistic condition that was often associated with this vigilante act of justice (i.e., lynching). Lynchings were always preceded by a ceremony that went largely undiscussed. Lynching mobs would frequently dismember the Black body and sell its pieces as relics to and for spectators. As Harvey Young stresses, “the magic of the souvenir anchors itself in its status as contrabands, from a given place or an event. This is why the body parts as keepsake trumps postcards or pictures of the same lynched body.”⁴⁶

⁴³ David Garland, “Penal Excess and Surplus Meaning: Public Torture Lynchings in Twentieth-Century America,” *Law & Society Review* 39, no. 4 (2005): 794.

⁴⁴ Mowatt, *Lynching as Leisure*, 1366.

⁴⁵ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002), 18.

⁴⁶ Harvey Young, “The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching,” *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005): 646.

The white-supremacist gaze, emblemized in lynching, seeks to uproot the Black body physically through acts of violence and metaphysically by constructing Black people as uncivilized. This perception has developed into a phobia for a large portion of white America.

As discussed in the preceding section, to better understand how the gaze works within public Blackness and society, we must first consider the complicated relationship that the white gaze has with the Black body. The white gaze is what William Hart refers to as “the criminogenic gaze,” in which “Black people, especially Black males, are regarded as criminal.”⁴⁷ When the Black body is considered criminal, it must be contained not only spatially but also within our collective imagination concerning how and where it should appear.

When we examine the carceral impact and abuse directed at the bodies of Black men and boys living in impoverished urban areas since the Civil Rights Movement, we can see the continuing effects of Hart’s conception of the criminogenic gaze concerning what Tommy J. Curry refers to in *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* in relation to the omission of Black men and boys from our society. The changing American economy during the 1970s and 1980s, according to Curry, had a significant effect on the economic mobility of Black men living in the United States.⁴⁸ “In the second half of the twentieth century, the post–Civil Rights economic prospects for Black men, who had traditionally been blue-collar workers and laborers, were marked by poverty and growing unemployment.”⁴⁹ According to Curry’s reflection on Amadu Jacky Kaba’s 2008 essay “Race, Gender, and Progress: Are Black American Women the New Model Minority?” Black men have not made as much progress out of poverty as their female counterparts, who have made tremendous economic, political, and educational strides in recent decades. “In many ways, their position indicates only further

⁴⁷ Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” 95.

⁴⁸ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of the Black Manhood* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017), 106.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

social and political marginalization.”⁵⁰ However, according to Curry’s analysis of a study conducted in the late 1970s by James B. Stewart and Joseph W. Scott, they “observed that because Black men are racialized men,” they are subjected to “deliberate and institutional programs to remove them from society.”⁵¹ The notion of eradicating the Black men and boys from society connects lynching to control the Black masculine body to modern policing and imprisonment of the Black masculine body. Both entities have played a significant role in the systematic attempt to erase the bodies of Black men and boys in our society.

In their 1978 essay “The Institutional Decimation of Black American Males,” both Stewart and Scott reflect on a question raised by Jacquelyne Jackson and *American Sociologist*: “Where are the Black Males?” According to Stewart and Scott, this question was prompted by Jackson’s examination of the ratio of Black males to Black females in major cities, which revealed that in 1970, “there were only 85 Black men for every 100 Black women in the Black population aged 25 to 64.”⁵² In 1970, the “sex ratio for the child-bearing age group (15–44) was 87, indicating that the lack of Black males is not due to high mortality rates among elderly Black men.”⁵³ This essay claims that America’s carceral system “destroys Black families, removes fathers from homes, and makes Black men, both literally and figuratively, a disenfranchised and unemployed undercast.”⁵⁴ However, according to Stewart and Scott,

“At first glance, the long-term persistence of a dramatic imbalance in the sex ratio among Blacks, as well as its precipitous decline since 1920, might appear to be a natural phenomenon associated with American society, as a similar trend can be seen among whites. This analysis, on the other hand, tries to show that the primary factor causing a sex imbalance among Blacks is the coordinated operation of various institutions in

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² James B. Stewart and Joseph W. Scott, “The Institutional Decimation of Black American Males,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 2, no. 2 (1978): 82.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Curry, *Man-Not*, 107.

American society that systematically remove Black males from the civilian population.”⁵⁵

For Curry, “Stewart and Scott maintained that the institutional decline of Black men through police violence and incarceration emerged from a political economy that deliberately confined young Black men to poverty, exploited Black males for cheap labor, and rationalized their death as a consequence of their deviance and undesirability in American society.”⁵⁶

In a report published in the *American Sociological Review* in 2004, “the U.S. penal population increased sixfold between 1972 and 2000, leaving 1.3 million men in state and federal prisons by the end of the century.”⁵⁷ Around 12 percent of Black men in their twenties were in prison or jail by 2002. Researchers claimed that prison time had become a normal part of early adulthood for Black men in poor urban neighborhoods due to high incarceration rates.⁵⁸ According to the most recent study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2019, “the imprisonment rate of Black adults at the year-end 2019 was more than five times that of white adults (263 per 100,000 white adult U.S. residents) and almost twice the rate of Hispanic adults (757 per 100,000 Hispanic adult U.S. residents).”⁵⁹ Both the historical practice of lynching and the contemporary practice of policing, surveillance, and imprisonment to control the Black masculine body have the same objective in mind: to eradicate what is most feared about the Black masculine body. To escape America’s system of punishment is to escape both death and isolation.

⁵⁵ Stewart and Scott, “Institutional Decimation of Black American Males,” 82.

⁵⁶ Curry, *Man-Not*, 107.

⁵⁷ Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, “Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration,” *American Sociological Review* 69, no 2 (April 2004): 151. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/000312240406900201>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Prisoners in 2019,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, last modified Oct. 2020, <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=7106>

As previously noted, the desire for Black privacy is a manifestation of the difficulty of living in two worlds, which becomes a concern when the Black masculine body enters white social spaces and society as a whole. Frantz Fanon reminds us that in the white world, the man of color faces “difficulties in elaborating his body schema.”⁶⁰ The self-image of one’s own body is entirely negative. A pervasive sense of unease permeates the body, causing it to question its existence. The advantages of Black privacy include the potential for the Black body to avoid “an atmosphere of certain uncertainty,” where the body no longer becomes an “object among other objects,” but purely human.⁶¹ Simply put, Black privacy becomes an internal space where one can focus on life while selflessly reclaiming what is continually disfigured and destroyed: the Black body’s very presence in the world.

In response to this anti-Black structure of public Blackness and America’s anti-Black carceral practices, the Black body is forced to adapt to complicated mechanisms of surveillance. “From slave codes to Black codes to segregation laws to the codes of color-blind racism, Black people have been constructed by an incarcerating -and-carceral gaze.”⁶² The question then becomes, how can Black privacy protect and sustain the Black body in public Blackness?

Black Privacy and the Sustainability of the Black Body

For the Black body to sustain itself, Black privacy must safeguard the Black body from the dominating nature of public Blackness. For some Black people, public Blackness may lead to a fracturing of their identities to survive. W. E. B. Du Bois called this phenomenon “double consciousness,” an existential state in which one inhabits two worlds in one dark body. This

⁶⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” 94.

perception of self, pushes the Black body into a state of absence.⁶³ When the Black body is in a fragmented state, the notion of the self must become nonexistent to itself if it chooses to live within the domain of public Blackness. Consequently, public Blackness produces this state of double consciousness, forcing the Black body to negate itself or reject its existence to be public. As Yancy argues, “the Black body through the hegemony of the white gaze undergoes a phenomenological return that leaves it distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence.”⁶⁴

The internalization of this misrepresentation by Black subjects brings them to perceive themselves in the way they have been imagined by the white gaze: as an object to be feared. Public Blackness demands the Black body either comply with this warped, anti-Black perspective or wither into a state of hopelessness. As Hart explores in his analysis of the demands imposed on Black people by the white-supremacist gaze:

Black people are induced to normalize the gaze of white supremacy, to internalize the surveillance, to discipline and punish themselves. In concert with the criminal justice system, [carceral regimes] the dynamics of the carceral American imagination, Black Americans are regarded with animosity, contempt, and suspicion. Even small groups are regarded as insurrectionary or riotous.⁶⁵

Public Blackness, therefore, coerces Black people to embrace and “normalize the gaze of white supremacy.”⁶⁶ The Black body undergoes a phenomenological return due to the white gaze’s control, rendering it “distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence.”⁶⁷ As Fanon describes in his reflection about what he experiences when he meets the gaze of the *Other*:

Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze gliding over my body suddenly smoothed out rough edges would give me back

⁶³ My use of the term *absents* implies that the black body, when caught in public blackness, becomes so conscious of its position within it, that it seeks to become invisible to move about.

⁶⁴ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 109.

⁶⁵ Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” 94.

⁶⁶ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 109.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the lightness of being I thought I had lost, and taking me out of the world put me back in the world.⁶⁸

According to Fanon, the gaze has the power to influence the body's movement in the world and the way the body appears to itself.⁶⁹ This, I might add, is only possible if the Black body, as the subject, embodies the gaze of the *Other*, as well as its perspective and imagery.

Black privacy is an approach that allows Black people to avoid public Blackness and its systemic violations of the Black body by defending how Black people recognize their own position in the world, ontologically speaking. Public Blackness shapes the Black body in ways that are harmful to Black people who cross its course. The Black body is viewed as deviant and a danger to the social order within the constraints of public Blackness. This fearful white-supremacist imaginary justifies the carceral regimes that are summoned to police and murder Black people at will. The mere presence of Black bodies within white public spaces (i.e., suburban communities, social spaces, schools, college and university campuses) petrifies what Hart calls the “whiteopian dream; an imaginary (utopian) space devoid of Black people.”⁷⁰ Black privacy becomes a response to society's neurotic behavior toward the Black body, which Black people themselves cannot avoid. When the Black body becomes visible within the structure of public Blackness, it becomes marked for death (i.e., Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Botham Shem Jean, Eric Garner, John Crawford III). Public Blackness compels us to ask, “What does it mean to be killed by the American imagination?”

When a Black body is out of place in white spaces, it must be destroyed either metaphysically or physically by the state. Dead Black bodies, whether physically and metaphysically, are “needed in order to magnify white existence.”⁷¹ The ontological fear that the Black body experiences are the

⁶⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, 89.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” 100.

⁷¹ Ibid., 116.

consequence of having to live in public Blackness. According to Hart, “Black body existence does, in fact, mean killing Black bodies.”⁷² Fear of dying in public due to being Black leads some Black people to become hypervigilant and seek refuge in Black privacy. The mere idea of being engulfed in public Blackness can be disruptive to one’s well-being, triggering a slew of health problems. The Black body is forced to either flee or maneuver inside public Blackness. In any case, Black privacy is required to protect the Black body from the violence within public Blackness, especially when it is perceived to be out of place. According to Hart, in American society, Black bodies that appear “out of place are threatening.”⁷³ They “threaten to pollute the space they inhabit through various kinds of contagion (especially crime). Whether Black people live there or not, Black bodies do not belong in whitoian spaces.”⁷⁴

The epitome of white-utopian spaces that tend to criminalize Black people and their bodies is public Blackness. “Blacks in social spaces are regarded as an invasive species that needs to be carefully monitored, controlled, and possibly uprooted.”⁷⁵ In attempting to defy Black publicness through Black privacy mechanisms, the Black body is bound to adjust to white distortions of its presence while trying to diminish them. In this manner, the Black body finds itself imprisoned within the white imagination. This is where the body is confronted by a warped image of itself, facing “a reality held together through white bad faith and projection that is ideologically orchestrated to have no trace of its social and historical construction.”⁷⁶

One thing that the deaths of Taylor, Floyd, Arbery, and countless others have shown us is a consequence of being Black in public that forces one to want to be isolated. Whether the Black body

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁶ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 100.

is in motion or motionless, no matter how young or old, no matter if it exists as male or female, no matter if it is asleep or awake, one could maintain it will forever be perceived as a problem.

Bibliography

- Pettit, Becky and Bruce Western. "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration." *American Sociological Review* 69, no 2 (April 2004): 151–68. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/000312240406900201>.
- Curry, Tommy J. "Killing Boogeymen: Phallicism and the Misandric Mischaracterizations of Black Males in Theory." *Res Philosophica* 95 (April 2018): 236–72.
- Curry, Tommy J. *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of the Black Manhood*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017.
- Dray, Philip. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2002.
- Fredrickson, George. *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1971.
- Garland, David. "Penal Excess and Surplus Meaning: Public Torture Lynchings in Twentieth-Century America," *Law & Society Review* 39, no. 4 (2005): 794.
- Glaude Jr., Eddie. *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*. New York: Broadway Books, 2017.
- Gordon, Lewis R. *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*. New Brunswick: Humanities Press, 1995.
- Grant, Donald L. *The Anti-Lynching Movement: 1883–1932*. San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975.
- Hart, William David. "Constellations: Capitalism, Antiblackness, Afro-Pessimism, and Black Optimism." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2018): 20.
- Hart, William David "Dead Black Man, Just Walking." In *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Context and Contemporary Manifestations of Radical Dynamics*, 91–100. Edited by George Yancy and Janine Jones. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2013.
- Jackson, Ronald L. *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- Markovitz, Jonathan. *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Mowatt, Rasul, "Lynching as Leisure: Broadening Notions of a Field." *American Behavior Scientist* 56, no. 10 (Oct. 2012): 1367. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0002764212454429>.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winnant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Polizzi, David “Social Presence, Visibility, and the Eye of the Beholder: A Phenomenology of Social Embodiment.” In *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Context and Contemporary Manifestations of Radical Dynamics*, 173–81 Edited by George Yancy and Janine Jones. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2013.

Sharp, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Williams, Jason. “Race as a Carceral Terrain: Black Lives Matter Meets Reentry.” *Prison Journal* 99, no. 4 (May 2019): 390–95. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0032885519852062>.

Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gaze: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2008.

Young, Harvey. “The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching,” *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005): 646.