

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: 'EXPERIENCE THIS LOVE GIVING ENERGY': PARENTING AS ACTIVISM, AFFECTIVE LABOR, AND THE DEPLOYMENT OF BLACK LOVE IN CONTEMPORARY BALTIMORE

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The Baltimore City uprising of 2015 was in part a reaction to the death of Freddie Gray, but also a response to the repression of this current neoliberal moment. The city's Black citizenry is one which is profoundly impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline, abject poverty, entrenched neighborhood violence, police aggression and hyper surveillance, underemployment, family stress, health issues, and a host of other challenges and manifestations of violence. Considering this, how does anyone provide a message of hope and engage Baltimore's largely Black population? This dissertation is a case study that explores the activism of one Black man in contemporary Baltimore and his manifold approaches to the strong, social and economic headwinds that continue to blow through the city. It discusses his efforts to educate and empower his children, other Black youth, and the greater community; his parenting and "otherfathering" as activism; and his deployment of love—Black

love—as an important and powerful intervention in spaces where there is often a dearth of resources, opportunity, and hope. This study also considers the everyday life and struggles of a contemporary African-centered organic intellectual and the affective labor involved in his pursuit of transformative change in his community and others like it. This includes a lack of support both in finances and labor, among other challenges. And lastly, with the featured activist’s intended audience in mind, this work explores the subjectivity of Black youth in Baltimore and discusses them as engaged witnesses, artists, and resisters in the face of pervasive violence.

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CONTEMPORARY BALTIMORE

by

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Ecclesiastes 3:11

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Work your way up. You gotta work your way. You gotta work. This is the mission...this is the work. [I] introduced it to my children. I'm a real revolutionary. It's a ministry. Not just being successful. [It's about] gettin' knowledge and information out there. Offering alternatives. [We're a] proud and mighty people. Comin' from the woman. Those girls. [They] bring life and love back to music. It's a ministry.¹ –*Jabari Natur*

We are heroines. We are winners, every one of us. We are poets. We are the present. And, make no mistake, we are the future.² –*Iris Jacob*

Introduction

Originally, I embarked on this research as an exploration of Black adolescent girls and their engagement with Hip Hop music and culture in Baltimore. However, the research evolved into an exploration of activism in Baltimore through the lens of Hip Hop and those who use it as a tool to affect change in the current neoliberal climate. The evolution of this work encompasses conversations about contemporary, Black social movements and how some people, young people, in Baltimore conceptualize their place and existence in a city so emblematic of the current struggles of Black people living in many urban environments in the United States. This came to explore the power and practice of parenting as activism along with the affective labor and costs for the faithful in pursuing the arduous and protracted work that activism (in different forms) entails.

¹ Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, April 27, 2015, Baltimore, Maryland.

² Iris Jacob, "Introduction," in *My Sisters' Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*, ed. Iris Jacob (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), xxi.

Jabari Natur, the manager of Hip Hop/R&B group Watoto from the Nile, and the father of three of the group's original members, emerged as a fascinating figure early on in my research.³ Watoto is a group comprised of all Black girls, and has been since its inception (2010), and I wanted to pursue work with them to understand how Black girls engage with Hip Hop culture through activism and groups like Watoto. While I could not pursue that research path for different reasons, I was intrigued by what I saw in Natur and his mission in the lead up to the work I discuss in this dissertation. I was prompted to ask, "How does a Black man in present-day Baltimore pursue a message of hope and an African-centered/Black nationalist-influenced/Pan-Africanist ideology as a means to combat pervasive messages that demean and marginalize Black people? How does he engage Baltimore's Black population, which is profoundly impacted by the violence of the school-to-prison pipeline, abject poverty, entrenched neighborhood violence, police aggression and hyper surveillance, underemployment, family stress, health issues, and a host of other challenges? Part of Natur's answer is that you do it through Hip Hop—more specifically, you do it through music and community work/support. And, lastly, but certainly not in the least, you do it with your children—Black girls, in fact. With this, I also had to ask, what does that look like on the ground? How does this stance play out in everyday life? What challenges do Natur, Watoto from the Nile, and other like-minded activists face in pursuing this means of engagement within what is contemporary Baltimore

³ Jabari Natur is the name he uses for all of his work in the community and beyond. It is not his given name (i.e. his legal name), but it is the name by which he is known to various community members and collaborators. It is also a name by which he can be identified; even so, he prefers that this name be used throughout this work.

city? I also had to ask what Natur's goals were and are, in total. What is his vision, and what does he ultimately want? Why "Watoto from the Nile" and *his* girls?

A 2015 Facebook post credited to Natur may give us a little more insight into some of his aims: "All my years in the movement I have always been about changing the minds of our people, these girls are not just a group but here to change the world, come out today to experience this Love Giving Energy..."⁴ I want to explore the movement of which Natur speaks, which looks to encompass his mission to change the minds of his people and for the girls of Watoto to change the world. His last comment, "experience this Love Giving Energy," looks to be particularly important as I move forward. The presence of love, especially Black love and its connection to energy appears to be vital and significant, especially in pursuit of transformational change. Additionally, the importance of truth (specifically truth telling) in the face of systems that seek to obscure and misdirect, suppress and subjugate, and manipulate and marginalize can't be understated. Ultimately, Black love is a powerful tool and (re)source used by Natur and Watoto to address everything from racism, white supremacy, and related violence to the importance of a healthy diet that incorporates things like kale and rejects the use of drugs.

Natur and Watoto are heirs to a venerable and robust legacy of community agitation and activism in Baltimore and beyond, which I discuss at greater length in Chapter Two. They seek to engage Black people and Black communities near and far, with a platform that champions self-determination and self-efficacy, all steeped in the

⁴ Jabari Natur, Facebook post, March 1, 2015, 6:47 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/WatotoFromTheNile>

knowledge of the more comprehensive history of Africans and Africans living in the United States. I say comprehensive as it is crucial to note that Black history—African history—does not begin with enslavement. In light of this, Natur and Watoto’s agenda focuses on decentralizing Western ways of viewing themselves and others like them in order to advocate for and model African-centered and informed ways of knowing, doing, and living life. I contend Black love is a central component to this as it emerges in what Natur calls Love Giving Energy (LGE for short). LGE is a driving force, a tool, a resource, and a restorative balm to aid in their mission to change their world and that which lies beyond it.

The focus of this dissertation is to consider the deployment of Black love as LGE, a form of energy, as well as other significant phenomena that I observed during my time spent with Natur, Watoto, and members of their community. Three of those important phenomena are parenting and “otherfathering” as activism and the affective labor involved. I explore them in the context of Natur’s multi-pronged approach to engaging young, Black people in the city, including his own children. This includes not only supporting and cultivating Watoto, but nurturing their kale chip business (Watoto from the Nile Raw Kale Chips), and expanding the reach of his barbershop, Conscious Heads. In fact, Watoto from the Nile Raw Kale Chips is a fixture at all the marketplaces where Natur’s Solvivaz-sponsored events are held, and he has increased the reach of his barbershop by teaching young boys the trade of barbering and by providing a space for young women to style hair. Natur and Watoto operate with the support of other people in the African-centered community, even if limited at times, and they also pursue their mission with a backdrop of grinding racial, intra-racial, and

institutional violence against young, Black people among a multitude of other challenges. This violence takes many forms, as noted previously. Even so, Natur and Watoto's message of hope is more than a message, it's a ministry. I use the term ministry here as I interpret Natur's use of it: the word ministry is used not just to define an organization or group, but to present an agenda and a mobilization around that agenda. Consequently, ministry, in this sense, functions as both a noun and a verb. This ministry functions with violence, particularly racial violence, vibrating in the background, almost like a soundtrack. Yet, Natur and Watoto are looking to change the soundtrack for young, Black people in the city. The conversation is best served with a look at what I consider to be a flashpoint in present-day Baltimore history: the 2015 uprising.

Uprising

I was at the movies with friends in a neighboring county when the Baltimore uprising of 2015 transitioned into its first night of unrest. My friends were worried about whether I would be able to get home and what I would return home to with all that was unfolding. Similarly, my sister was concerned about what my north Baltimore neighborhood would be like that night. I acquiesced to their concerns and drove farther north to my sister's house for the night. (Her home is in a quiet suburb northeast of the city.) My family and I sat watching the news with grave concern and slight disbelief. Not at the rebellion unfolding before our eyes, but at the lack of understanding of what was taking place for the world to see. Parts of Baltimore, especially in the Penn North section of the city and other parts of the west side, were on fire, and we could understand many of the reasons why. The pain, frustration,

despair, and anger finally erupted, spilling into and onto the streets of West Baltimore and beyond.

A little over a year after the 2015 Baltimore rebellion, in June of 2016, I traveled to St. Louis to visit a good friend (and St. Louis native) who I have known since college.⁵ I knew my friend lived very close to Ferguson, Missouri, I just did not know how close until we were in the car on our way to eat dinner one day. It took us less than five minutes to drive from my friend’s home to the street—the very spot—where Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teen, was shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson.⁶ There wasn’t anything particularly special about the way the street looked. In fact, it looked rather ordinary to me. In all honesty, I expected both the street, its buildings, and its inhabitants to look more run down, wearier.⁷ Perhaps it was because we visited midday; we were on our way to an enthusiastically anticipated—though obligatory—meal at one of the famed Sweetie Pie’s locations. The sun was shining brightly, the street and buildings were quiet and clean. There

⁵ We were joined by another college buddy who happened to hail from Newark, New Jersey (by way of Jamaica). I’m a Queens, New York native, and at the time, it did not dawn on me that my friends and I represented areas that have seen its Black citizens launch rebellions in the modern era. Two had notable uprisings in the years leading up to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther, King, Jr., and one several decades after.

⁶ Let me note here that the word “Black” will be capitalized in all of my original uses of it regardless of whether or not I use it as a noun or adjective. I do this to resist the ways in which “Black” has been used as a derogatory term, specifically as a marker for the erasure and the geographical specificity denied me (and people like me) along with many of my ancestors due to the institution of chattel slavery in the Americas. There will be times when I use the term African-American to reference Black people who are the descendants of slaves in the United States, but I will often use the (unifying) term “Black” to denote people of African descent. I will retain the lower-case use of the word when quoting someone else who writes it as such.

⁷ I attribute that expectation, at least in part, to the internalized bias fueled by inherently negative depictions of Black people in mainstream American media.

were no protestors, no residents, just the street and the small, metal (plaque) memorial to Brown set inside a section of sidewalk that was about 150 feet away from where his body lay two years before. It was sobering to think that an unarmed, eighteen-year-old Brown, was killed and left uncovered for four hours on that small, unremarkable street, while his death at the hands of the police sparked remarkable outrage and resistance the world over. These thoughts and images stayed with me, playing on a constant loop in my mind as I broached this project with Natur and Watoto and pursued it for this dissertation.

Building and Setting the Stage: Neoliberalism, Black Love, Activism, and Black Intellectual Thought and Praxis, Part I

My interviews with Natur began not long before the 2015 uprising in Baltimore; in fact, our first interview was several hours before all hell seemed to break loose on Baltimore's west side the afternoon of April 27, 2015. I contend Baltimore's 2015 uprising is significant not just because of the level of the outcry of Black people living in a city with one of the highest homicide rates per capita, or damage to property and businesses in the city, or the coverage of this event, but also because of the cultural moment in which it occurred. Arguably, it was the response to not just the death of Freddie Gray, a young, Black man who died from injuries sustained during his time in Baltimore police custody, but it was a response to the deaths of Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, an unarmed Black man who died not long after he was restrained and placed in an outlawed chokehold by New York City police officers. Not one of the officers responsible for the deaths of Brown, Garner, or Gray were found guilty of wrongdoing during the judicial process; their actions were

deemed justified in every case. This was the case in other deaths of Black people at the hands of law enforcement. Sean Bell, Oscar Grant, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, and so many others lost their lives at the hands of law enforcement in their presence or officially in their custody. We must also consider the deaths of Black people at the hands of those empowered and emboldened by a racist society that casts Black people as a constant threat to be confronted violently: examples abound in the cases of Trayvon Martin, Lieutenant Richard Collins, III, and Renisha McBride.

The Baltimore rebellion that followed the death of Freddie Gray occurred less than 50 years after the 1968 rebellion that erupted in the days after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Undoubtedly, some of the same issues remain in the way of police brutality and hyper surveillance of Black communities, underemployment and divestment of economic resources in communities of color, and a pervasive American modus operandi of separate and unequal. In his monograph, *They Can't Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America's Racial Justice Movement*, journalist Wesley Lowery, quotes an eighteen-year-old Baltimore resident by the name of Shauley McCray who came out to help clean up West Baltimore after the rebellion of 2015: "It shouldn't take buildings burned for people here to have a voice...Baltimore has been broken, it's been broken all my life. I'm not saying that all of our cops are bad, I'm not saying everyone who was out here at night during the

rioting is a criminal. I'm saying that this is a wake-up call."⁸ It was also déjà vu of the most serious kind.

Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford highlight and quote former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist and chairman, H. Rap Brown, who spoke in the wake of the uprising in Newark and in the heat of the Detroit rebellion in July of 1967. These are comments he made almost 51 years ago that could almost be indistinguishable from our current time if repeated in a speech made by a contemporary activist:

A stable and just society cannot mount a successful offensive action against a black youth who breaks a window and at the same time plead that it is powerless to protect black youth who are being murdered because they seek to make American democracy a reality...Each time a police officer shoots and kills a black teenager, that is urban crime. We see America for what it is and we recognize our course of action.⁹

We can fast forward to Baltimore in 2015 with H. Rap Brown's words as a backdrop for what occurred. Notably, Natur intentionally refers to what happened in the spring of 2015 as a rebellion as opposed to a riot to highlight that what spurred the unrest was not a lust for looted items and a desire for neighborhood businesses like CVS and Rite Aid to be burned to the ground. They were an outlet for the frustrations of many people living in a fishbowl, one filled with the putrid water of poverty, crime, under investment or divestment in their communities, and hypervisibility in the eyes of the

⁸ Wesley Lowery, *They Can't Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America's Racial Justice Movement* (New York/Boston/London: Little, Brown and Company, 2016), 135.

⁹ Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, "Introduction" in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 4, quoted from a reprint of H. Rap Brown's statements featured in *Black Power: SNCC Speaks for Itself: A Collection of Interviews and Statements* (Ann Arbor, MI: Radical Education Project, 1967), 5.

state (e.g. police, local and federal government agencies and offices). This is not much different from what Brown and his peers cited during the season of unrest in which he delivered such a poignant commentary and signal to a strategic change of course. And change is still happening. Natur continues to move forward with an agenda that aims to marshal his talents and the talents of young people to agitate for change in Baltimore from the ground up. Yet, this does not occur in a vacuum and not without resistance, resistance which includes the challenges that fill the aforementioned fishbowl. They represent some of what stands in the way of uplift for Black people in many places like Baltimore. In light of this, it is critical for me to consider the role of this neoliberal moment and how we may understand neoliberalism in the context of Natur's story.

When I speak of neoliberalism, I realize that I need to offer a working definition as we consider it in the context of this current project. David Harvey offers a definition that I have found to be particularly useful:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence [*sic*], police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture.¹⁰

¹⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

Within this framework, the (liberal) state is the enemy of freedom. Consequently, its desire to do good by intervening on behalf of the poor, working classes, and others who are socially and/or economically vulnerable, undermine and the erode the moral fiber of a society by stripping away the poor's duty to work. Left unchecked, this destroys the bedrock upon which competitive capitalism is built along with its machinery.¹¹

Harvey continues that neoliberalism has “become a hegemonic mode of discourse” inasmuch that “it has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”¹² According to Harvey, neoliberalism becomes the default stance we take in considering the way things are; it is the lens with which we see and do. Stuart Hall acknowledges that the term “neo-liberalism” (or neoliberalism as I consistently use here) has its issues, and does not fully explore “internal complexities and geo-historical specificity.”¹³ Even so, Hall argues that it pulls enough important components together to allow us to use it provisionally even as we continue to explore its theoretical underpinnings and the contours of its borders. Moreover, he notes that neoliberalism is not just one thing; it varies in terms of how it is deployed. Hall also contends “it combines with other models, modifying them. It borrows, evolves and diversifies. It is constantly ‘in process.’ We are talking here, then, about a long-term tendency and not about a teleological destination.”¹⁴ In this

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “The Neo-Liberal Revolution,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (2011), 706-707, doi:10.1080/09502386.2011.619886.

¹² Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 3.

¹³ Hall, “The Neo-Liberal Revolution,” 706.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 708.

vein we can posit that neoliberalism changes as needed to further solidify its power and influence. This embodies the ultimate goals of hegemonic discourse and structures.

Hall also makes the case that using the term, or rather naming it, “is *politically* necessary to give the resistance to its onward march, content, focus and cutting edge.”¹⁵ This brings William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* to mind where Juliet argues that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Likewise, regardless of the label we use to define the phenomena that neoliberalism entails, we engage and experience its negative effects in tangible and discernible ways. Arguably, Natur and people like him do not have to know the term “neoliberalism” to call it by its name, so to speak. They see it, feel it, smell it, and have an intimate familiarity with it. In light of this, neoliberalism is an important part of this discussion since it shapes and impacts innumerable portions of American society, among many others globally. Furthermore, neoliberalism’s intersections with the racist ideologies and structural racism that are foundational to America’s political economic practices should not be understated.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s third edition of their influential book, *Racial Formation in the United States*, takes on neoliberalism in discussing its origins and how its mantle was taken up in the latter decades of the 20th century. They are clear to define it as a racial project, not just one of capitalist accumulation.¹⁶ In their view, neoliberalism as a hegemonic project would not fulfill its goals without

¹⁵ Hall, “The Neo-Liberal Revolution,” 706. Emphasis is the author’s.

¹⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York/London: Routledge, 2015), VitalBook file, Chapter 8.

espousing and centralizing a racial ideology of colorblindness (e.g. “we don’t see race,” “race doesn’t or shouldn’t matter”); colorblindness roundly denies the sociohistorical and economic impact of race on Americans. Neoliberalism was a project adopted and fed by Republicans and Democrats alike, though its rise can be attributed to the hand of the new right. Members of the new right, comprised in part of former white, Dixiecrats who defected to the Republican Party, were alarmed and harbored resentment over the modest gains made by the Civil Rights Movement and other new social movements that sought to expand democracy to all of America’s citizens. These movements not only represented a financial threat to the ruling elite; they also signified a threat to the ruling elite’s consolidated power and the status quo for governance in the United States.

As Omi and Winant argues, neoliberalism then took root “under the banners of anti-statism and authoritarian populism,” drawing from existing racial resentment and a belief system predicated upon the worthiness of producers (whites) and the unworthiness of non-productive classes of people (largely Black, but others were included).¹⁷ Ronald Reagan was a champion for this endeavor, with George Bush I building on its foundation and gains. However, Bill Clinton ran with the ball, too. Omi and Winant note that neoliberalism combines repression with austerity, and Clinton didn’t miss a step gutting and reorganizing programs that supported the poor, ramping up aggressive policies that led to the mass incarceration of Black and brown

¹⁷ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, VitalBook file, Chapter 8.

people, while supporting the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which prompted job losses for many working Americans.¹⁸

Colorblindness could hide its inherent racism in plain sight, at once using some of the same language from the Civil Rights Movement's calls for equality to attack legislation and programs that would inevitably negate some of the slight gains achieved during and right after the civil rights era. It also has the power and weight of race baked into its very existence. Considering this, Omi and Winant are careful to note that colorblindness (in the latter part of the 20th century) was a nuanced way to wed consistent worship of the free market with policies that would viciously prey upon and/or exclude Black people and other marginalized people, including (poor) whites. And while many advocates for colorblindness and neoliberalism were forced to lick their wounds after the election (and reelection) of Barack Obama, his rise to power did not change the status quo in terms of governance and the standing of Black Americans.

It is true that Obama inherited the recession of 2008, but most of the financial support dispensed in its aftermath was funneled to the very same businesses that brought down the American (and global) economy, not to struggling families. Black Americans experienced what Omi and Winant describe as their/our greatest cumulative loss of wealth in U.S. History, wealth which already paled in comparison to that of whites before our most recent recession. Obama's presidency did not change Wall Street's massive bottom line, or prevent the neutralization of the Occupy Wall Street movement, or the government surveillance of Americans, or the over-

¹⁸ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Chapter 8.

policing of communities of color, nor did it help assuage the racial resentment that ushered in and fuels this modern age of neoliberalism. He also did not birth George Zimmerman, but the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, and Freddie Gray occurred during his presidency. Those truths are significant.

Lester K. Spence explores what he terms “the neoliberal turn” and its impact on African Americans in this contemporary setting. He begins his discussion by recounting his own story of survival in our current neoliberal environment and the negative impact it has had on him and his family. Spence shares how he suffered several financial setbacks due to car accidents and ensuing medical bills and other costs. These mounting bills resulted in his family’s decision to stop paying the mortgage on their home in Baltimore, one he and his wife struggled to purchase for the sake of their children’s well-being. In reflecting upon his situation, Spence considers his predicament within the broader contexts that speak to social and economic vulnerability. He does this by asking how his financial situation would be different if he was an employee at Walmart and not a tenure-track professor at a prestigious university. In short, Spence humanizes and makes plain how people may experience, engage, and expound upon where we are with this neoliberal turn, particularly in a Black/African-American context:

The neoliberal turn, the gradual embrace of the general idea that society (and every institution within it) works best when it works according to the principles of the market, can go part of the way. We now routinely refer to public officials as people we *hired* rather than elected, as CEOs rather than political representatives. We place business executives with more managerial expertise than education expertise in charge of public school systems. We use the Bible (and increasingly the Koran) as entrepreneurial self-help guides rather than as spiritual texts. We increasingly believe an array of public goods and services (from education to utility provision to social security) are better off distributed by private profit-making actors. Finally, we no longer respect

the dignity of labor, and increasingly propose hustling to make ends meet. The neoliberal turn helps explain the rise of inequality, the increasing anxiety and insecurity we all feel (regardless of how much money we make or what type of job we have), how a number of institutions (including but not limited to black churches) we've relied on have been transformed, how narrow our political imaginations have become... For a variety of reasons we've been forced to hustle and grind our way out of the post-civil rights era, and it is this hustle and grind in all of its institutional manifestations that's resulted in our current condition.¹⁹

The current condition that Spence references is the very backdrop that Natur, Watoto, and their peers must use to move forward. The grind is very real on multiple fronts, and Black people, regardless of their socioeconomic position are not exempt from state and market violence.

Robin D. G. Kelley explores the neoliberal climate in which we now live and the criminalization of Black and brown people in America in his piece, "Thug Nation: On State Violence and Disposability." It was released a year after the 2015 Baltimore uprising as part of an edited work titled, *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*. However, Kelley specifically highlights how young (Black and brown) people are fighting back and using the pain of this moment as a motivating force to end the injustices of our time:

'Pain is the greater motivator in the short run' is the perfect mantra for neoliberal logic. That is to say, pain and profit. Pain, or bearing witness to pain, is also a motivator 'in the short run' for ending the thuggery of the state... These activists and revolutionaries are our children. They are on the front lines resisting their own criminalization, fighting to demilitarize schools and streets, and taking on the state directly. Pain may be the motivator in the short run, but love is their long-term motivation.²⁰

¹⁹ Lester K Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2015), xxiv-xxv. Emphasis is the author's.

²⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, "Thug Nation: On State Violence and Disposability," in *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, ed. Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton (New York: Verso, 2016), 32-33.

Natur mentioned love giving energy (LGE) in his Facebook post about Watoto and what they bring to their work and performances. Here, love in Kelley's piece is positioned as an important component in the struggle for social justice. It is also here that I consider love, Black love, as a motivation and as a tool to affect pervasive, enduring social change moving forward.

In looking at neoliberalism as a lens of sorts, the role of activism in practice must be considered. Activism is described by Merriam Webster Online as "a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue."²¹ The controversial issue in question here in this work is the systemic and systematic oppression and repression of Black people and how Natur determines to confronts them. However, as I will suggest, Natur advocates for a freedom that begins internally with his family and community first, not just changing the policies and practices of the city of Baltimore or the United States overall. Additionally, Natur is not paid to protest; his financial security and well-being are not predicated upon how many rallies he attends. In contrast, my sister reminded me that we live in an era of activism that is well-funded: lobbying. Lobbyists and lobbying firms are paid to agitate and cultivate influence on behalf of their clients, especially over particularly sensitive issues (drug safety and costs, access to natural resources like oil and the subsequent prices we pay for them, etc.). And in turn, I argue, lobbyists are intellectual, professional activists for hire.

²¹ "Activism." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed June 2, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/activism>.

I also contend that Natur is an “organic intellectual,” and it is important to define exactly what I mean in using the term. In using the term organic intellectual I draw from the work of Antonio Gramsci. He maintains that everyone is an intellectual, though only some receive the title in life.²² He also distinguishes between different types of intellectuals, but organic intellectuals are those who emerge from the laboring classes serving as leaders and influencers. Natur embodies the idea that everyone can be an intellectual along with the phenomena of emerging from the folk as an organic intellectual. Additionally, the work of the late Clyde Woods with his explication and call for a contemporary deployment of a “blues epistemology” provides an additional framework to see Natur as an organic intellectual in his roles as activist, entrepreneur, and father.

In terms of strategies with which to fight back, Woods writes, “Working class African Americans in the [American] Delta have constructed a system of explanation that informs their daily life, organizational activity, culture, religion, and social movements, they have created their own ethnoregional epistemology—a blues epistemology.”²³ He also describes blues epistemology (or the blues as epistemology) as that of working class African Americans who, through “social organizations and intellectual traditions lived, understood, and changed their reality...in spite of, and in opposition to, plantation powers” which served as the foundation for the “myriad

²² Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. (New York: International Publishers, 1971/2005), 9.

²³ Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, The Haymarket Series (London/New York: Verso, 1998), 16.

traditions of resistance, affirmation, and confirmation that were to follow.”²⁴

Furthermore, in referencing the Gramscian notion and model of organic intellectuals, Woods discusses the power of indigenous knowledge (that is utilized and respected) and its impact on our society at large: “The privileging of indigenous knowledge, of blues epistemology, and of millions of organic intellectuals denies power to another elite-led regime of stagnation. What is left? A society where every member is both a teacher and a student.”²⁵ This epistemology embodies much of Natur’s labors of Black love. He teaches others, especially the girls of Watoto, but they teach him, too. He also honors and fosters their capacity to teach others.

The concept of Pan-Africanism is also an important ideological principle that demands explanation. It frames the work of Natur and some of the other activists and organic intellectuals like him. The late Manning Marable offers a useful description of Pan Africanism and its revolutionary potential:

Behind Pan-Africanism was the idea that people of African descent the world over shared a common destiny--that our forced dispersal through the transatlantic slave trade, our common oppression under colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean and under Jim Crow segregation in the United States, the exploitation of our labor power under capitalism, and the denial of political rights had created parallel contours for struggle. Our kinship was also cultural, social, and historical, and we found within ourselves the genius and grace of being which were denied us by the racist standards of the white world. By renewing our connections, we forged a consciousness of resistance which could be felt across the globe.²⁶

²⁴ Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, 29.

²⁵ Ibid, 289-290.

²⁶ Manning Marable, “Toward A Pan-Africanist Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Speaking Truth to Power: Essays on Race, Resistance, and Radicalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 206, <https://bltc-alexanderstreet-com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bltc/getvolume.pl?S17236#DIV29>.

Baltimore activists and intellectuals, Lawrence Grandpre and Dayvon Love, proffer their stance is marginalized by “mainstream political discussions and by academia” because it questions the very (racist) and supremacist foundations about which both have been built and have been developed over time.²⁷ It is also important to note here that what can be construed as their ambivalence over inclusion or exclusion on the basis of sexuality and gender identity may also contribute to their marginalization. Grandpre and Love contend that these foundations are integral to American civil society. They also assert that not being tethered to institutions that (would) demand they keep the truths they espouse to themselves is imperative. They pronounce their resistance forcefully, while acknowledging how difficult it can be to consistently pursue the work that they do: “As grassroots activists, we are committed to building authentic community power, without chasing grants or being in good favor with established institutions. Our stance has made it difficult to sustain the work that we do, but because we hold no allegiances, we are able to say the things that you will read here.”²⁸ They describe themselves as activist-scholars where their work on *The Black Book: Reflections from the Baltimore Grassroots* was an outgrowth of the New Timbuktu Project, which they described as a

...Thoroughly independent, alternative learning community of activists, citizen-scholars, and professional academics that foster dialogue centered on the heart of the issues that undermine the livelihood of Black people. To sustain that community, we channel the wisdom of our ancestors and our elders and apply it to contemporary socio-political issues. Reorienting scholarship from the academy to the lived realities of Black life in America will produce material benefits for Black people. As activist-scholars, we see

²⁷ Lawrence Grandpre and Dayvon Love, *The Black Book: Reflections from the Baltimore Grassroots*, ed. Jada Fletcher (Baltimore, MD: Leaders of A Beautiful Struggle, 2014), i.

²⁸ *Ibid*, i.

ourselves as functioning within a lineage of Black intellectuals who realized that the division between the “college bubble” as illusory and counterproductive. Instead, we pull from our activist work in the Baltimore community and our academic experiences in the world of intercollegiate policy debate to bring unique perspectives to both activism and academia.²⁹

Grandpre and Love’s categorization also provides useful definitions for two ideological stances that govern and inform their perspectives and work as activist scholars. The first, “Afro-Pessimism,” is defined as an “inquiry into Black life predicated on the idea that American civil society is fundamentally organized on the structural positioning of the slave and therefore in opposition to Blackness and Black people.”³⁰ Additionally, they define Pan-Afrikan Nationalism as a “tenet of global self-determination for people of African descent.”³¹ Their ideological stance on liberation speaks to that of Natur, especially in the way of decentralizing white people and their institutions in their move towards liberation for Black people.

We are carving out a political space where the notion of Black self-determination is not imbued with the baggage loaded onto terms like ‘black power,’ but predicated on the claim that the development of independent Black institutions is essential for Black liberation. We can no longer rely on white people’s benevolence and goodwill to uplift our people.³²

Like Natur, Grandpre and Love assert that Black self-determination is critical to any platform that purports itself to attend to the needs and collective interests of Black people, particularly in an American context. I found their conversation of discussions about race particularly poignant in that they argue it is often considered a topic on which anyone can express an opinion, regardless of any investment in research or a

²⁹ Grandpre and Love, *The Black Book: Reflections from the Baltimore Grassroots*, i-ii.

³⁰ *Ibid*, ii.

³¹ *Ibid*, ii-iii.

³² *Ibid*, iii.

commitment to acquiring the expertise for someone to actually speak about the phenomena in ways that are informed by the lived and material experiences of people of color. They continue by explaining the difference between racism and bigotry, and how the marriage of prejudice to power is what defines racism.³³ And they do not let us forget that power and access to resources to preserve that power to the exclusion of Black people and other people of color continues to fuel it all. They afford us two premises that are important to understanding their work and the work of people like Natur:

- “Put simply, racism is not about being mean; it is about the power that white people have developed through their exploitation of Black people and other people of color.”³⁴
- “Liking Black people is not racial justice. Relinquishing resources to Black organizations to empower the community is racial justice.”³⁵

African-centered work focuses on the intellectual and cultural heritage and resources that can be explored and discussed in the study of ancient African civilizations. An African-centered approach also boldly challenges the place of Western modes of thought, history, and the unexamined belief that those Western products should be at the center of discourse.

Cornel West’s reflections on the plight of the Black intellectual supports some of Grandpre and Love’s positions, but also stands in contrast to other portions of their ideological position. West’s piece, “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” outlines some of the challenges that Black intellectuals have faced and continue to face in

³³ Grandpre and Love, *The Black Book: Reflections from the Baltimore Grassroots*, iii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

pursuing not only the life of the mind, but in using one's work in the service of transformational change, locally and globally, within one's own (Black) community, and within the academy. One of the simple but compelling argument's West makes is thus: "The predicament of the black intellectual is inseparable from that of the black community—especially the black middle-class community—in American society. And only a fundamental transformation of American society can possibly change the situation of the black community and the black intellectual."³⁶ His discussion of various paradigms of engagement for Black intellectuals, from the bourgeois, Marxist, and Foucaultian, to an insurgency model (one he prefers over the others for its potential and incorporation of the useful traits of other models), reflect a critical negotiation of challenges and opportunities for transformational scholarship and action. He ends by stating, "The future of the black intellectual lies neither in a deferential position toward the Western parent nor in a nostalgic search for the African one. Rather it resides in a critical negation, wise preservation, and insurgent transformation of this black lineage which protects the earth and projects a better world."³⁷

Arguably, the difference between West, Grandpre and Love, and Natur is where they choose to focus their energy. Grandpre, Love, and Natur choose not to spend their energy to liberate Black people by changing American society and its racist structures. Instead, they believe in starting at home in their own communities to liberate Black people through challenging Western narratives with African-centered

³⁶ Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2 (Winter 1993-1994), 62.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 67.

ones, along with economic development and the investment in other Black institutions. To end, Grandpre and Love make it clear that they draw from the work of other Black scholars like Dr. Frank Wilderson, Neely Fuller, Jr. and Dr. Francis Cress Welsing who also confront racism as white supremacy and critically explore its impact on Black people in various areas of their lives.

In thinking about Black thought and praxis, I am reminded that Natur's work with Black girls as an activist, father, and producer is informed by Black girl subjectivity. I contend that the ways the girls of Watoto do what they do in writing and performing is an outpouring of not only his mentorship, but the ways they internalize and conceptualize what they learn, what they believe, how they feel, and what and how they choose to create as Black girls. Therefore, the subjectivity of Black girls is important to explore here as we continue our discussion of Natur, the work he does, and that which he endeavors to do.

Black Youth Subjectivity and Black Intellectual Thought and Praxis, Part II

About seven or so years ago, I came home from work and drove past a group of Black girls singing and dancing, huddled around one of the few picnic tables in the western Baltimore county apartment complex where I lived. I noticed the girls weren't just huddled: some of them were standing on top of the picnic table. Their outfits were multicolored; their hair styled in a variety of ways; some were tall, others short; some were plump and others slight; a few deep brown, others medium or light-caramel colored; and they were all singing that song at the top of their lungs, and in unison no less. To be honest, I couldn't quite make out all the words, but their passion and joy were so clear. Ahhh, to be girls, to be Black girls, basking in the light of the

afternoon and the early evening, enjoying communion among themselves—I couldn't help but smile as I entered the house.

Full disclosure: I don't know any of the girls I saw that day. I would see them playing with other girls and boys in the neighborhood if I arrived home early enough, but wasn't privy to all the things they dealt with on the day-to-day, good and bad. That said, seeing those girls still brought me back to my upbringing in Queens, New York, in a small brick home out past Jamaica. My parents left behind the Queensbridge housing projects with my brothers right before I was born, and a year later, we moved into our own single-family home. Unlike my older brothers, my sister and I spent our childhoods and teenage years in a small community of working class and middle class Black folks, all of whom lived in detached single-family houses. My family stayed connected to friends and extended family who remained in the Queensbridge housing projects we happily left. We did this through our church, which we continued to attend even after we moved more than forty minutes or so away by car or train.

My sister and I found comfort, safety, and creative outlets with our homegirls, playing double-dutch until those streetlights came on and we could no longer stand; playing hand games; singing; or watching the older kids stroll by with boomboxes blaring Hip Hop and R&B, or even watching in awe as one of the neighborhood playas whizzed by in souped up hoopties spreading Hip Hop's message for blocks around. Actually, forget the neighborhood playas: I remember sneaking my brother's stereo into my room at night to listen to DJ Red Alert and other DJs on New York's

Kiss FM and Hot 97. This was no easy feat growing up Pentecostal, but I loved Hip Hop and there were so many artists to choose from, men and women alike.

And because of my experiences as a youth exploring what Hip Hop had to offer, even if limited in ways, I grew quickly tired of hearing about Hip Hop and its impact on Black (adolescent) girls without hearing from the girls themselves. I also grew wary (and weary at times) of traditional scholarship and how it broached the notion of Black girls speaking up and out about their own experiences. I once asked, “Can someone other than Ophelia speak (or even the Riot Grrrl)?,” to underscore how Black adolescent girls had been ignored in much of the scholarship related to the experiences of adolescent girls in American society. Early in my graduate training, I wanted to delve more into the research surrounding Black adolescent girls and their relationship to Hip Hop as a culture. Since I started to ponder and research this topic, I stumbled upon more and more work that focused on Black, teenaged girls in a variety of contexts, including their relationship to Hip Hop culture. My question then became, “Does any of the existing work enable Black (adolescent) girls to speak for themselves? If so, how? Also, what is the relationship between young and mature Black women and adolescent girls as it relates to their involvement and community within Hip Hop culture in contemporary American society?” This was the initial context and the questions that guided my early work before *Natur* and *Watoto*.

During the early stages of my graduate research, it was important that I review some of the classic scholarship related to adolescence, as well as work that specifically spoke to the experiences of adolescent girls as a whole and Black adolescent girls in particular. Looking back to look forward was critical in that much

of the extant attitudes about Black adolescent girls are steeped and based in part on concerns that have existed since slavery.³⁸ Now, much of the scholarship that focuses on Black women and girls seems to address the impact of multiple oppressions and changing cultural, social, and economic landscapes, locally-globally. However, current research and collaborative projects provide more nuanced examples of how Black girls are impacted by multiple oppressions, as well as how they live their lives, both in the midst of them and in spite of them.

The range of texts, analysis, and criticism does identify various strains of thought based upon the changing tides and a myriad of experiences recounted by Black women and girls. The work of Faye Z. Belgrave, a psychologist, addresses African-American girls from a variety of thematic perspectives (demographics; self and identity; peers and kinship; communities and neighborhoods; health and wellness, etc.) in her 2009 monograph, *African American Girls: Reframing Perceptions and Changing Experiences*.³⁹ A predecessor to that is Joyce West Steven's 2002 work titled, *Smart and Sassy: The Strengths of Inner-City Black Girls*. Stevens work highlights resiliency and the strengths of Black girls. What became interesting to me

³⁸ Nazera Wright writes about 19th and 20th century black children's literature with a focus on the growth and development of Black girls. In her dissertation, *Girlhood in African American Literature 1827-1949*, she asserted that specific literary works featured in literature for Black children were evidence of the concern with racial uplift (through emphasis on appropriate conduct and instruction) and the belief that Black girls were the key and should lead the way in the effort(s) to uplift the race. Additionally, Wright asserts that Gwendolyn Brooks's modernist poems in "Annie Allen" (1949) "offer an alternative to the conduct manual of the time by privileging the black girl's interiority and freeing her from an instructive role." Wright's 2016 monograph *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, further explores these themes.

³⁹ Faye Z. Belgrave, *African American Girls: Reframing Perceptions and Changing Experiences*, (New York/London: Springer, 2009).

is how those experiences began to speak to each other, or not, in cultural criticism and scholarship. Moreover, as I examined more scholarly work, I thought more about how Black adolescent girls were/are incorporated in work about them. When, where, and how did/do they enter said pieces?

Many of the theories I reviewed in terms of theories of childhood and adolescence did not specifically focus on Black adolescent girls for extended periods of time. That said, scholars across the spectrum, like Erik Erikson, and Marnina Gonick, Sinikka Aapola,⁴⁰ and Anita Harris⁴¹ among others touch on the challenges that Black girls and boys faced in different contexts, both here and abroad. However, their scholarship did not hold Black youth at the center of their analysis. Conversely, in looking at the work of some other contemporary scholars who focus on issues and topics related to Black youth, I also found that the voice of Black adolescents appeared to be “on mute:” I thought, “They’re talking, but can we even hear them?”

Examples could be found with Andreana Clay’s article, “Keepin’ It Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture and Black Identity,” or Joan Morgan’s piece in *Essence* magazine, “Sex, Lies and Videos,” as well as the work of Beverley Guy-Sheftall and Johnnetta Betsch Cole’s *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African-American Communities*. The seemingly undisputed damage that commercialized Hip Hop music and visual culture has caused factor heavily in the critiques and analysis of their work. This is not to say that said damage(s) should not

⁴⁰ Sinikka Aapola, Anita Harris, and Marnina Gonick, ed. *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

⁴¹ Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

be scrutinized in considering the adverse impact it has had and continues to have on Black youths in general, and Black girls in particular. However, such flat critiques may silence these very same girls, and what are the repercussions of such silencing when it comes from Black women?

This query lead me to examine some of the other texts and trends in cultural criticism and scholarship as it relates to phenomena like Hip Hop feminism as well as the concept and praxis of voice for Black adolescent girls. The work of (Hip Hop) feminists like Gwendolyn Pough (*Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, 2004), Kyra D. Gaunt (*The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, 2006), Ruth Nicole Brown (*Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*, 2009, and *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, 2013), Bettina Love (*Hip Hop's Lil Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South*, 2012), Oneka LaBennett (*She's Mad Real: Popular Culture and West Indian Girls in Brooklyn*, 2011/2016), Chamara Jewel Kwakye (*Wish to Live: The Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy Reader*, 2012, co-edited with Brown), Tia Smith-Cooper (*Contradictions in a Hip-Hop World: An Ethnographic Study of Black Women Hip-Hop Fans in Washington, D.C.*, 2002), Chyann Oliver (“Don’t Believe the Hype”: *The Polemics of Hip Hop and the Poetics of Resistance and Resilience in Black Girlhood*, 2009), and Caitlin Cahill et. al. (“The Personal Is Political: Developing New Subjectivities through Participatory Action Research”) speak to the many contradictions of growing up and participating in a Hip Hop influenced world, and they find different ways to offer young women and girls opportunities to expound

upon their experiences in a “post-Hip Hop” global landscape and changing economy.⁴²

As noted previously, there has definitely been an evolution of sorts aimed towards highlighting the experiences, perspectives, and production of Black adolescent girls and boys, especially in their relationship to Hip Hop. The challenge is how to do this with research paradigms that inherently exploit (even if inadvertently) the researched to the benefit of the researcher and/or other involved groups and entities? With those concerns in mind, there is much that can be learned from Black feminist anthropology and its theoretical focus and inextricable embrace of interdisciplinarity, intersectionality, organic intellectuals, and working with the oppressed to identify and collectively resist the structural and hegemonic forces that shape the lives of Black women and others who are oppressed.⁴³ Irma McClaurin notes that Black feminist anthropology enables Black women researchers to resist and deflect the pressure to choose between dueling dualities that might otherwise cause one to choose between one’s role as an anthropologist (researcher) and one’s personal identity as a Black woman.⁴⁴ Moreover, she asserts, “we use our identity as a seminal point of departure for our theorization and simultaneously as a point of entry for our

⁴² By post-Hip Hop I am referring to the *notion* that Hip Hop is dead and devoid of its former transformative potential. I, and many of the Hip Hop-influenced scholars featured here, do not agree with this idea, but I contend it helps to shape and influence the current discourse in many spheres both within and outside of the world of Hip Hop culture.

⁴³ Irma McClaurin, “Introduction: Forging A Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics of Black Feminist Anthropology,” in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McClaurin, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

ethnographic research.”⁴⁵ I have had to engage this duality consistently to move through this type of work. My insider-outside status put me in positions that were uncomfortable, not just because of the research itself, but because of the possible repercussions of this work for Natur and other Black people: the stakes, at least to me, are always going to be high. McClaurin, and other sister-anthropologists and scholar-activists she invokes and includes in her anthology, helped to lay important groundwork for scholars like Ruth Nicole Brown and Chyann Oliver in genuinely collapsing the personal, political, and the scholarly in powerful ways. I ascribe to this stance and world view as it honors my epistemological and ontological stance throughout this project.

Following in this tradition, Ruth Nicole Brown puts her cards on the table in her work *Black Girl Celebration: Towards a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* by noting the contradictions and competing agendas that she had to address (on a consistent basis) in working with Black girls. I was particularly swayed by her discussion of previous research related to Black girls, control, and how she wanted her work to be something other than just another afterschool program.⁴⁶ Brown also continues this work with her 2014 monograph, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*.⁴⁷ Chyann Oliver’s work also engages girls in a way that does not seek to control their perceptions and reflections of and on their relationship to Hip Hop.

⁴⁵ McClaurin, “Introduction: Forging A Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics of Black Feminist Anthropology,” 16.

⁴⁶ Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girl Celebration: Towards a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 19-30.

⁴⁷ A promotional video for the book features quotes and images from girls affiliated with the program: <https://youtu.be/OomZIYFmFkE>.

Oliver aptly speaks truth to her own work by fusing the artistic with the scholarly, collapsing them as unique and powerfully relevant. This offers another potent and effective tool for young girls to wield in examining and discussing their worlds and how Hip Hop factors within them. This can also be seen in the scholarship of Stephanie Akoumany, whose research in *Reimagining Resilience: Exploring Black Early Adolescent Girls' Experiences, Desires, and Needs While Growing Up in Baltimore City* further highlights the nuances and boundless potential of Black girls. Akoumany, once herself a Black girl growing up in Baltimore City, weaves her own experiences and the experiences of her family into her piece in ways that add even more richness to the project at hand. The work of Sheri Parks explores the extraordinary experiences, history, and knowledge of Black women in an American context in the second edition of her monograph, *Fierce Angels: Living with the Legacy of the Sacred Dark Feminine to the Strong Black Woman*. Parks also offers a nuanced view of Black women's lived experiences which extend well beyond myths, stereotypes, and the flattened descriptions of Black women in America. Weaving in her own experiences with those of her collaborators arguably enables her readers to situate themselves in her scholarship, further collapsing the distance that such scholarship can create.

Brown's undertaking in *Black Girl Celebration* is compelling because of how collaborative she made it even as she delved into the world of "Black girl life," at once the qualitative researcher and simultaneously the South Carolina Black girl who loved to sing and dance.⁴⁸ The group with which she worked, "Save Our Lives Hear

⁴⁸ Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Towards a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*, xiii.

Our Truths” (SOLHOT) was a point of entry to put Hip Hop feminism to work, which entailed resisting control of the girls in SOLHOT. Brown asserts, “We do not have a language that accurately describes what it means to work with Black girls in a way that is not controlling their bodies, and/or producing white, middle-class girl subjectivities.”⁴⁹ Additionally, engaging with the work of Aisha Durham (*All Up in My Kitchen! Fingerwaves, Sistercurls and Extensions of Hip-Hop Feminism in the Third Wave*, 2007) and Joan Morgan (*When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life As a Hip-Hop Feminist*, 1999), among many others, Brown stakes her claim as a Hip-Hop feminist and what it entails for her:

My hip-hop feminist politics and pedagogy is grounded in the political/social activism of working with Black girls in particular, girls of color in general, to remix, rethink, create, cipher, and dance, and break dance, for the purpose of Black girlhood celebration. Each of these things are a starting point from which I relate to girls in a new way about the issues *some* of us face and obstacles and *some* of us hold on to, like past lovers, too close for too long. After all, it is Black girls and women who are simultaneously hypervisible in the music videos, continuously invisible as creators and contributors to the culture, and visibly underground organizing as hip-hop feminists to challenge hip-hop as everything masculine, homophobic, heterosexist, sexist, and commercial. When I seek out conversations about hip-hop and black girlhood, I have found company in the scholarship and activism of those organized under a hip-hop feminist identification.⁵⁰

With this, we have almost come full circle in that Gwendolyn Pough’s piece, “Love My Feminism but Where’s My Hip-Hop?: Shaping a Black Feminist Identity,” speaks to the work of Brown and others like her in making room for a Hip-Hop feminist critique and lens for scholarly work, activism, and a way of life.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Towards a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*, xiii, xv.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 40. Emphasis added by me.

The works featured above touch on many of the issues we encounter in our scholarship in American Studies, from issues of inclusion, representation, and (in)visibility; to racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and intersectionality; to the role of scholars and intellectuals out in “the field” or not, and the commodification of “otherness.” This frame will undoubtedly color how readers enter into conversations about the work here, as *any* frame would, but I contend that the potentially uncomfortable dialogue that would ensue from this approach would be fruitful. I’ll call it, as Mary Helen Washington has, “disturbing the peace.”⁵¹

Black adolescent youths as creators, narrators, and analysts are critical components of this project, even though it focuses primarily as a case study of the journey and activism of Natur. As I revealed previously, this research began with exploration of the cultural production and engagement of Black adolescent girls with/in Hip Hop (and beyond). However, even with the shift to Natur, I had to continue to ask, “How are Black youths speaking, creating, and making connections?” His belief in their creative potential and capacity should not be overlooked or minimized. And in my initial research, I found Iris Jacob’s edited book, *My Sister’s Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*, a powerful compilation in light of the aforesaid question, featuring the work of girls from a multitude of backgrounds.⁵² Jacob’s introduction also spoke directly to Mary Pipher’s *Reviving*

⁵¹ Mary Helen Washington, “Disturbing the Peace: What Happens to American Studies If You Put African American Studies at the Center?: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 29, 1997,” *American Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1998): 1–23.

⁵² Iris Jacob, *My Sister’s Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out* (New York: Owl Books, 2002).

Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls as well as Sara Shandler's *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about Their Search For Self* in noting that these works did not address and reflect the experiences and perspectives of girls like her, meaning girls of color.⁵³ Jacob's book itself featured many gems, including poetry, cultural criticism, and other literary work by girls of color.

One of the works from Jacob's compilation that spoke to me as a prime example of a Black youth engaging her surroundings is a written piece by Brooke Wilson, a young, self-identified Black woman, nineteen at the time her work was published. Her essay, titled, "My First Love: Skratching," introduces the reader to a world where she is a turntablist, hard at work, practicing her craft; she also presents herself as a critic of gender norms and the perils of advertising gone horribly wrong.⁵⁴ Wilson simultaneously questions the gender representations and exclusion of women like her in such a commercial. Moreover, she connects the tradition and skillful work of DJs to none other than another Black woman (i.e. Pam the Funkstress of the Oakland-based, Hip Hop group, *The Coup*), who is well respected within many Hip Hop circles for her work and commitment to revolutionary change.

Wilson dives into her piece with a scathing critique of a Gap commercial that features a young woman at a set of turntables, dancing around while two fairly well-

⁵³ Jacob, *My Sister's Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*, xv-xxi.

⁵⁴ Wilson's work is aptly featured in *My Sister's Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*. According to the book's editor, Iris Jacob, this anthology was compiled in (a more inclusive) response to Mary Pipher's influential work, "Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls." Jacob identified herself as a teenaged girl of mixed heritage.

known male DJs play for her and for us (the implied audience.)⁵⁵ She begins and continues with her account as follows:

Great American popular culture never ceases to amaze. The latest installment in my chronicles of female objectification, exploitation, and downright patronization comes courtesy of Gap Incorporated. It's a Friday night, and I have just finished another frustrating practice session on a set of turntables. I sit down to relax and watch some TV after those hours of hard work, only to find out in thirty seconds that it didn't really mean anything...Reality is a strange malleable thing, and this commercial would have the average person believe that in reality girls don't scratch or even DJ. Of course, in the beginning of the commercial it appears as though she [the featured model] at least starts the record even if that is the limit to her action...Granted there are a lot of DJ groupies out there who instead of getting dreams or hobbies of their own, latch themselves on to a man and his dreams. But more importantly there are a whole lot of girls who DJ.⁵⁶

What I value in Wilson's essay, is not just her assessment of the flattened, sexist (and racist) images of the two males (of color) featured working their DJ magic for a white-identified model, but I appreciate how Wilson also situates herself in a tradition that specifically honors other women scratchers and DJs, especially noting the influence and talent of Pam the Funkstress of *The Coup*.⁵⁷ In weaving and building her argument, Wilson notes that Gap could have redeemed itself by casting Pam the Funkstress in place of the model. However, Wilson also provides an incisive assessment of why that did not occur: "...Pam the Funkstress wasn't in the ad because Pam isn't a model. Not only does she not fit the skinny white mold demanded of most models, she actually has cultivated a talent. Having a profession and a talent for

⁵⁵ The commercial can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC3-Hzc8a4o>

⁵⁶ Brooke Wilson, "My First Love: Skratching" in ed. Iris Jacob, *My Sister's Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 9-10.

⁵⁷ Moreover, it should not be lost on us that Wilson's critique is directed towards the clothing conglomerate based in another Bay Area city: San Francisco.

something other than applying makeup aren't very helpful when all you should be thinking about are boys and jeans."⁵⁸

Wilson's critique gave voice to her frustrations as to how she was excluded from Gap's representations of those who DJ, in addition to her frustration with its subtle message that encouraged girls to buy their jeans, and to cultivate "the desire to find a boy who does something great and bask in his ambitions."⁵⁹ Her work laces together so much in articulating how she self-identifies, her ambitions, her respect for the traditions and contributions of other women of color in her field, and a critique of American popular culture, race and gender representation, and one might even argue, capitalism. Yet, Wilson, as far as we know, is not writing from the position of the academy; she is writing from the position of someone compelled to respond to her exclusion and such a brazen insult to her intelligence and craft. The fact that she is a young, Black woman, often self-identifying as a girl, should not be lost on us. Not only is she fighting against marginalization, she is speaking up and out against what she perceives as a distinctly American popular culture that seeks to relegate her and her peers to the periphery.

Here we see a critique that is compelling in part because Wilson shifts our focus from "The Academy" to other realms and spaces that provide support and room for critiques and analysis of American society and cultural phenomena. Moreover, this particular analysis comes from an individual often dismissed, demonized, and marginalized within our society: Black girls. Perhaps I could say, that in this case, the

⁵⁸ Brooke Wilson, *My First Love: Skratching*, 10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

subaltern spoke, and she “laid it down.” More importantly, she, and the other contributors to the anthology in which her work is featured, speak to their identities as young women living in America (and some living abroad) of various races and ethnicities, and at different stages in their identity development. There is so much power in their speaking, and in the fact that their narratives, poetry, and essays, can be read by other girls and young women of color, in addition to scholars, activists, families, teachers, coaches, clergy, volunteers, and a multitude of others whom have a vested interest in the how young women negotiate and conceptualize their lives, both here and abroad. I also extend this to our consideration of the reflections of Black male youths as well who experience marginalization and hypervisualization in different ways. I feature the narratives and creative work of two young, Black males who have called Baltimore home to further expand my contemplation of Black youth subjectivity in the context of contemporary Baltimore. Baltimore as home and backdrop shapes their experiences, especially in the wake of constant violence.

An early challenge was that most of the works I found by Black adolescent girls were in a written format. I then expanded my search for more work that involved different avenues for expression: the visual, the spoken, the physical and unspoken (e.g. dance, fashion). Brown’s work with her colleagues and the girls of SOLHOT provided a refreshing look at so much of what happens as girls actively create on a daily basis. Singing, rapping, dancing, stepping, playing, styling hair and clothing, etc. are fixtures within the lives of many different Black girls. I am grateful that I, too, was reminded of that ongoing production and fellowship throughout my time with Natur and Watoto from the Nile. And while I move to focus on Natur during this

project, Black youth subjectivity and potential remains a critical component of it all. Natur helps to nurture and foster the parts of it that speak to liberation and revolution, but also struggles with the parts of it he may not fully understand as a man and a father. *There would be no Watoto from the Nile without Black girls and what they bring to the table. There will be no future without the breadth of Black youth to guide moving forward.*

A Few Notes on Intersectionality and the Academy

Intersectionality is an important framework that informs much of what I discuss in this dissertation. We all live at the nexus of our different identities, some of which are more pronounced than others depending upon the context. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race* offers a skilled explication of the ways in which race serves as a metalanguage in how people can even approach other dimensions of difference. In this case, Brooks Higginbotham considers race and its interplay with gender. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's piece, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew" also addresses the interplay and interlocking power structures that are informed by race, gender, and other markers of difference, simultaneously. The notion of engaging multiple, interlocking oppressions and dimensions of difference that work simultaneously have come to be known as intersectionality, a conceptual framework, for which Williams Crenshaw is credited for naming. This enables us to consider the myriad portions of our identities that impact how we negotiate within

what scholars Bonnie Thornton Dill and Maxine Baca Zinn term the “matrix of domination.”⁶⁰

The late poet-activist, Audre Lorde also provides a compelling argument that implores us to consider oppressions as inseparable. She notes that racism, homophobia, and sexism are indivisible, and that it was particularly sad when the planners of a conference she was scheduled to attend assumed that Lorde and the other Black feminist scholar scheduled to attend had nothing to contribute to conversations about topics like developing feminist theory, heterosexuality and power, existentialism, the erotic, and women’s culture and silence, among others.⁶¹ Their exclusion, and the corralling of their contributions to a marginalized space, served to reinforce standing hierarchies of privilege. To that end, Lorde argues vehemently that you cannot utilize the tools of patriarchy (i.e. hierarchy and exclusion) to examine and critique the productions and reproductions of that very same patriarchy.⁶²

I find Lorde’s poignant declaration, “*Survival is not an academic skill,*” powerful for a multitude of reasons.⁶³ It asserts that 1) academia is not the be all and end all in terms of pathways to liberation and social justice; and 2) survival involves learning how to stand alone and build bridges with those outside dominant structures

⁶⁰ Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill, “Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism,” *Feminist Studies*, 22 (Summer 1996), 323-324.

⁶¹ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113, Black Thought and Culture Database, <https://bltc.alexanderstreet.com/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bltc/getvolume.pl?S8108#DIV15>, 110.

⁶² Ibid, 110-111.

⁶³ Ibid, 112. Emphasis provided by the author.

to create environments within which we all can thrive.⁶⁴ Moreover, those threatened by breaking down the walls of oppression are those that may benefit the most from them or believe that they provide their only means for support and survival. This hearkens back, at least in small part, to the work and stance of Grandpre and Love in operating outside of the academy and traditional political arenas. In tandem, they also clear the path to engage more fully with the work of not only Natur but Black girls.

Methodology

I initially embarked on a research project that would explore Black adolescent girls as cultural agents, creators, and activists with the backdrop of Hip Hop music culture. I was introduced to the music of Watoto from the Nile through a friend (and a YouTube video), and I set off to pitch the project to them after attending events and functions over the course of a few years. Scheduling conflicts and ethical concerns about working with members of the group amid transitions to new schools and the evolution of their lives in the wake of their parents' divorce gave me serious pause. Even so, the emergent and grounded nature of the work led me to focusing on Natur, and my interest in Watoto from the Nile and the decision to pursue collaborative research with the group was a case of non-random sampling, which can also be described as non-probability sampling. As H. Russell Bernard notes, in-depth research requires collaborators who are informed, not just responsive.⁶⁵ In short, I

⁶⁴ Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," 112.

⁶⁵ H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 4th ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2006), 186-187. Bernard refers to what I term "collaborators" as informants. The use of the term "collaborator" is intentional on my part as informant is a weighted term that does not convey his/her/their role as a partner and active

reached out to Watoto as a group to work with on purpose based on their self-identifications and the work they have done and continue to do. Their selection falls within the categories of purposive (or judgement) sampling and convenience sampling, meaning I was looking for ways that Black, adolescent girls engaged with Hip Hop music and culture, especially as producers outside of purchasing music. Watoto satisfied that criteria, but they were also within a geographical area I could get to and afford to get to in less than two hours.⁶⁶ I was introduced to a YouTube video by Watoto from the Nile before I knew that the Natur and the members of the group were from Baltimore. The fact that young, Black girls were recorded as the members of a Hip Hop/R&B group who were rapping in response to Lil' Wayne was remarkable and timely. Along with my burgeoning interest in the group, I found Baltimore to be a compelling place to conduct research based on its rich history, as well as its contemporary challenges and opportunities. All of this coincided with my move to the Baltimore metro area based upon professional opportunities and obligations outside of my doctoral research.

I pursued qualitative work with Natur as a case study which utilized field methods drawn from ethnography. Natur and Watoto were the only case in my sample; I did not find others with whom I could work for a variety of reasons

participant who does more than relay information for me (as researcher) to decode and interpret.

⁶⁶ I worked full-time almost the duration of my time conducting research with Natur and Watoto from the Nile. Admittedly, it was a personal necessity that limited my access to the group in frustrating ways. Even so, Natur and Watoto and I worked around our schedules as best we could with me taking off work to meet with Natur or forgoing other personal obligations to attend shows and other events. In the end, I had to make peace with what I could and could not do.

(availability, accessibility, etc.). Through a series of in-depth interviews with Natur, participant-observation through attending performances for Watoto as well as events sponsored by Natur's outreach group (Solvivaz), which included the "Reality Speaks" lecture series, I pursued an understanding of Natur's work and mission. These activities lasted for roughly seven months as covered by the human subjects IRB approval form Natur signed.

Robert K. Yin, an applied researcher and social scientist, provides useful guidance for using case study as a research methodology. Yin encourages researchers seeking to use case study methodology to consider the generalizing possibilities as opposed to advocating for particularization as far as analysis is concerned.⁶⁷ He proffers that case studies "are generalizable to theoretical propositions not to populations or universes."⁶⁸ Additionally, as Yin asserts, the case study method allows for the opportunity to explore "a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context [where] the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident."⁶⁹ In the case of Natur, context is critical to understanding his stance and belief system, as well as how he continues the work that he does despite the inherent difficulty and challenges he faces on multiple fronts (at work, with co-parenting, keeping financially afloat and striving to thrive, engaging with various agents of the state, etc.). Here, the case study method offers a significant (organic) opportunity to ponder and attempt to understand the endeavors, challenges, and

⁶⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 15.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 18.

triumphs of someone whose focus is not the mainstream in terms of his intended audience, approaches/strategy, and desired outcomes. This may also lead to a better understanding of some of what activists like Natur may offer their communities and experience throughout their efforts agitating for change.

I see this case as both an intrinsic one and instrumental one according to the taxonomy tendered by Robert Stake: I pursued work with Natur to both understand his individual example as an activist in this present moment, as well as what his case may tell us about Black activism in Baltimore in a contemporary context.⁷⁰ However, my objective is not to theorize from Natur's case: I have no agenda for Natur's work to ultimately function as a meta-narrative for Black activism(s) at a time that feels so critical in the wake of Black Lives Matter and other synchronous movements. Even so, this work could serve to bolster a collective sensitivity towards the labor of activists like Natur moving forward.

This project is not a traditional life history project given that I was not able to interview a series of people in Natur's circle. A proposal for future research would be to conduct a more traditional life history project that would incorporate interviews from family members, friends, peers, and the members of Watoto. However, I considered emergent themes based on Natur's personal narratives (i.e. stories), notes from my participant-observation and knowledge of Natur's work behind the scenes, including anecdotes from people who know and interact with Natur. In pursuing this inductive approach to the study of personal narrative, I draw from the work of

⁷⁰ Robert E. Stake, "Qualitative Case Studies," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 445.

Catherine Riessman. Riessman notes that the definition of personal narrative has been debated, however, she casts it as “talk organized around consequential events.”⁷¹ Additionally she suggests that the way a person makes sense (and meaning) of past experiences is by stringing them together through the use of (a) narrative form.⁷² As a meaning-making apparatus, narratives must be respected, left intact, and researchers must then ask how a narrator creates meaning through their own process.⁷³ My analysis draws from the exploration of personal narratives offered by Natur, as well as consideration of other information I collected and people, things, and events with which I engaged throughout this project. And in this analytical vein, the goal was to consider a textual analysis of Natur’s narrative as well as his own interpretation of his narrative. My interpretations are based in part upon his own.

As I referenced earlier, my role as a researcher/investigator has never been and will never be an invisible one. As someone who identifies as Black/African-American, the descendants of slaves and indigenous people in an American context, Christian, and a cis-gender woman(ist), I had certain access and limitations to what I could do with this work. That knowledge was at the forefront of my journey with Natur and Watoto. The fact I was not born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland but in Queens, New York limited my understanding in some ways, but also provided certain insights related to parts of urban American life. My undergraduate and graduate education provided useful resources that enable me to articulate certain phenomena

⁷¹ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993), 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

throughout this project, but not to the exclusion of the situated knowledge that Natur, and the family of Watoto brought to the table. Reflexivity offered an opportunity to explore some of what I brought to the research from its inception. Charlotte Aull provides a helpful definition of reflexivity in the context of social research, especially as it relates to ethnography:

Reflexivity, broadly defined, means turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity, at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research. These effects are to be found in all phases of the research process from initial selection of topic to final reporting of results. While relevant for social research in general, issues of reflexivity are particularly salient for ethnographic research in which the involvement of the researcher in the society and culture of those being studied is particularly close.⁷⁴

Additionally, the positivist approach to social research is predicated upon the notion and belief that an objective stance (or something very close to it) can be achieved through a rationalized, logistical process.

The search for a philosophically sound basis for ethnographic research which fully accepts its inherent reflexivity while still maintaining that its products are explanations of an external social reality requires both an ontology [way of being] that asserts that there is a social world independent of our knowledge of it and an epistemology [way of knowing] that argues that it is knowable. Such an enterprise also involves overcoming the dichotomy between a positivist understanding of social science and various hermeneutical perspectives, especially the interpretivist tradition in the ethnographic tradition.⁷⁵

Reflexivity is important, especially given many of the dynamics that accompany qualitative research. The impetus that brought me to Natur and Watoto was born from

⁷⁴ Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 2nd ed., ASA Research Methods (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4.

⁷⁵ Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 18.

my desire to explore more of the experiences of Black girls involved in Hip Hop culture. My interest in this work comes with the weight of my own viewpoints, which both color my approach to not only the research but what it has yielded and will yield in terms of understanding Natur's work. Reflexivity should not just focus on making transparent the motives of the researcher, along with his/her/their background and perspective, but it should also hold its assumptions and perspectives up for at least the same level of scrutiny as to which the researched and collaborators are subject to. The danger of not using a critical lens in cases of reflection and reflexive exercise on behalf of the researcher is the blind spot that seeing others constantly through the lenses of our own experiences without interrogating our positions. Paula Saukko argues that a researcher's self-reflexivity "enables the scholar to become acutely aware of the always situated and limited nature of her/his worldview, thereby opening up space for different interpretations of other people's as well as our own realities."⁷⁶ I also contend that our position matters not just because we pull the strings and levy a certain level of control, but our strings are pulled by things, too, internally and externally. Our personal histories and experiences, training, belief systems, economic standing, everything is baked into the way we approach what we do, and that matters.

The time to reflect on who you are and how you impact the process is critical. John Caughey provides useful exercises in his book *Negotiating Cultures and Identities: Life History Issues, Methods, Readings*, some of which primed me for considering my role in this research not as a silent, objective observer, but as

⁷⁶ Paula Saukko, *Doing Research in Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Classical and New Methodological Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 64.

someone with a story that would inherently impact and inform my pursuit of this work among many other aspects of the work itself. Subjectivity is an inherent part of research, both for the researched/collaborators and the researcher. I majored in anthropology as an undergraduate and was exposed to ethnographic work that presumed and championed the objectivity of the researcher. Thankfully, anthropologists of color among others began to push back long before I started my college career in 1996, but the fight was long from over, and it arguably is not over. As we contemplate the power dynamics of researcher reflexivity, the work of A. Lynn Bolles is also helpful here:

Reflexive anthropology introduces the researcher into a written work as an active social entity. It also seeks to identify and shore up the social distance that exists between the folk and the researcher. The effect is to tear away the veil of scientific objectivity and to remove the anonymity of the omnipotent observer of old.⁷⁷

The colonialist and imperialist past of social research can be seen in the tools some of us still employ to explore the lived experiences of myriad peoples the world over. However, an enduring commitment to challenging practices that obscure the role of the researcher and paint them as objective and omniscient beings who can interpret better than those they observe is well under way.

My original goal for this project was to engage in Participatory Action Research, with the girls of Watoto as co-collaborators and co-researchers alongside me. While that was not possible due to several challenges (competing schedules, personal challenges), it was still my belief that working with Natur was a

⁷⁷ A. Lynn Bolles, *We Paid Our Dues: Women Trade Union Leaders of the Caribbean* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996), 24.

collaborative effort of sorts. It would be misleading to paint our time together as purely collaborative, at least not in the way I initially envisioned. However, I approached Natur as a teller of his own truth and I did not see myself as a seeker of “the truth.” My goal was to understand Natur’s truth and the contemporary context in which he lives and presses towards his ultimate goals. It was also important that I seek to engage and understand my own truths and the tensions that exist in conducting qualitative work from within the academy, all this while concurrently questioning my place and the potential I harbor(ed) to hurt those who I respect enough to collaborate with and pursue in understanding how people who look like me and who share my heritage not only survive but endeavor to thrive and move forward through the daunting cultural, political, and economic headwinds that continue to blow.

My survival and opportunities to thrive are interconnected with that of Natur and the communities by which we are connected. What is more, I had to ask myself (and continue to ask myself) on more than one occasion, what would Natur gain for his time and energy given to this project, even if small? Ethics discourage a crass kind of quid pro quo, and rightfully so, yet, ethics always seems to land on the side that leaves those with which we work as they were before or worse off. Research ethics say to do no harm, but what happens when the harm done is baked into an academic system that exposes our collaborators and subjects to more scrutiny? I still struggle with these questions, especially as I could not do all that I set out to do in working directly with the girls of Watoto. However, it is my responsibility to continue to engage Natur about how this work in its current form can be used moving forward.

Also, my hope is that by sharing some of Natur's story and insights, along with my own, we may move the needle a little closer towards understanding how folks like Natur pursue love and invest in the boundless potential of his community in substantive ways that move us closer to better conditions and liberation for Black people. And it is not only about investments; it is about understanding why and how Natur makes room for the next generation to use their potential to affect change. The stakes have been high for generations, and Natur embodies not only the hope for the future and the willingness to labor for freedom, but he invests and sews into that he wishes to see bloom in the years to come: liberation for Black people in their minds, bodies, spirits, and pocket books.

Chapter 2: Baltimore Story

No...progress has been made without the shedding of blood.⁷⁸ –*Jabari Natur*

Setting the Stage: Baltimore before Natur

Natur's story begins more than a century before his birth in Baltimore in the 1970s, and his is one steeped in the history of African ancestors whose presence helped to shape Baltimore and other parts of Maryland from the advent of the slave trade in the Americas to the rebellions of the 1960s, 1990s, and 2010s. As his quote signals above, change came at great cost to Black Baltimoreans and Marylanders. It is here, then, that we turn to a cultural history of Baltimore and its black inhabitants because it gives context to how we may understand Natur's story and the forces that helped to shape him and the environment in which he now works and agitates for change.

Black Baltimore's Long Past: Black People in Baltimore before 1900

Harold McDougall notes in his work, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, that Baltimore is the northern most southern city and the southernmost northern city on the east coast.⁷⁹ Additionally, Baltimore's history as an important, culturally diverse port city should not be minimized:

A leading site in the importation of African slaves, Baltimore's participation in the slave trade reached a peak at the same time that the city emerged as a regional commercial metropolis because of the grain and iron brought in from the Midwest via the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Having developed at the

⁷⁸ Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, May 11, 2015, Baltimore, Maryland.

⁷⁹ Harold A. McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), 1, 25-26.

crossroads of the different cultures that have shaped America—part slave, part free; part “native” white, part immigrant; part southern, part northern, part Midwestern—Baltimore is rich in the social, civic, and cultural organizations produced by all these strains.⁸⁰

Leroy Graham asserts that Baltimore also became the unofficial Black capital (also termed a chief Black metropolis) by the time of the Civil War, given its large population of free Blacks and “the quality of abolitionism in the city.”⁸¹ Notable giants from Black society like Frederick Douglass once called Baltimore home, and along with other parts of the state of Maryland, has contributed to a rich Black cultural history, locally, nationally, and internationally.⁸² In fact, Barbara Field’s monograph, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground* provides us with a more nuanced view of Baltimore in the 18th and 19th centuries, the latter with an eye towards the plight and perspectives of Douglass and other Blacks, both bond, free, and everyone in between. She opens her book’s third chapter, which catalogues the problem of slavery in Baltimore, with Douglass and his view of the city as an enslaved boy:

When Frederick Douglass saw Baltimore for the first time, his impressions were of noise, confusion, and a vague sense of threat. He was, after all, a young slave not yet ten years old and fresh from the provincial isolation of the Eastern Shore...His first sight of Baltimore would have been in the late 1820s, when the city was still raw enough to remind a visitor of how recently it had been no more than a cluster of huts standing in the wilderness. As recently as 1752, that is all Baltimore was. It was the [American] Revolution that sent Baltimore into the giddy burst of growth that turned it into a city.⁸³

⁸⁰ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 1.

⁸¹ Graham, *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital* (Lanham, MD & New York): University Press of America, 1982), p.

⁸² Douglass resided in Baltimore while enslaved and was hired out on behalf his owner, who resided on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

⁸³ Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 40.

Fields goes on to establish that Baltimore's rapid growth in the 19th century from its sprawling inception in the 18th century was not contingent upon slavery and its expansion. She notes that by 1790, Baltimore had grown from "a handful of dwellings to a respectable community of thirteen thousand, [of] which slaves amounted to just over nine percent of the population; this is at a time when nearly one-third of the people of Maryland were slaves."⁸⁴ According to Fields, Baltimore's rise, as McDougall also intimates, was due in part to its value as a port city and its location on the middle ground of the eastern seaboard. Furthermore, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and the Midwest all became connected to Baltimore through commerce, not the slave economy. To highlight this point Fields specifically asserts that wheat and shipping did more for the economy of Baltimore than tobacco (i.e. slavery): "the important point is that the tobacco—which is to say the slave—economy had very little to do with the rise of Baltimore. The starting point of the city's development was the wheat economy of northern and western Maryland and of southern Pennsylvania."⁸⁵ Here we have a burgeoning city in a slaveholding state that boomed based on the commercial growth associated with the farming of wheat and the proliferation of major wars (The American Revolutionary War and Napoleonic Wars)⁸⁶, not the rise and fall of tobacco and other cash crops that relied upon slave labor to get them to market. The political economy of this reality highlights how the merchants who oversaw Baltimore's early boom period and slower, yet, important

⁸⁴ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century*, 41.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

growth in the periods after the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, “typically had no connection with the slaveowning elite, whose capital was Annapolis.”⁸⁷ These tensions came to a head over time as the interests of slaveowners clashed with the merchant class in Baltimore in the state legislature and during the Civil War.

As we consider Baltimore’s history as a city whose wealth and prosperity was tied to its commercial successes outside of slavery, we must specifically turn our attention to the makeup of the city’s labor force. Free blacks, slaves for hire by their owners, immigrants (e.g. from countries like Germany and Ireland) were a part of Baltimore’s labor force, and contributed to the flavor of the city. Slaves for hire would compete with free blacks and immigrants looking to work in the city.⁸⁸

McDougall posits that Baltimore was ambivalent about slavery, due in part to its inhabitants of free blacks and slaves for hire:

...in Baltimore a small community of free blacks had been established by the early 1800s through manumission and the ‘hiring out’ system. Slaves in the city were permitted in some instances to hire themselves out to employers, paying their master a percentage of their earnings and sometimes even maintaining their own homes and families. Partly as a result, the city was ambivalent about slavery, though as a municipality it remained under the thumb of the plantation owners who dominated the state legislature and, despite strong abolitionist activity in Baltimore, continued to defeat abolition bills.⁸⁹

Frederick Douglass was one such slave who hired himself out on behalf of his owner.

It was a frustrating and precarious position to be in, not owning oneself and all the fruits of one’s labor, while simultaneously having a taste of what it felt like to live

⁸⁷ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century*, 42.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁸⁹ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*.

outside of the hot box of slavery in locations like the Eastern Shore. We must also consider that slaves like Douglass lived with the constant threat of backlash from the free (both black and white) who disliked the presence of another labor competitor.

Free blacks, and one might argue, slaves for hire, posed a problem for those invested in the institution of slavery in Maryland: though slavery was not the driving force behind Baltimore, it, like other areas of Maryland, was impacted by the institution, and it helped to define many of the economic and social mores related to the treatment of people of African descent throughout the state. As McDougall and Fields note, the institution caused tension between those in government in the north (e.g. Baltimore), and those in eastern rural areas of the state and further south.

The population of free blacks grew over time due to economic pressures that forced slaveholders to get rid of their slaves through either sales or manumission (the latter was severely limited because of the panic in the wake of the slave rebellion incited by Nat Turner in Virginia).⁹⁰ This trend was due in part to the slowing need for labor coupled with the sustained needs of this population for food, clothing, and care to be provided by slaveowners. Even if the need for farmhands decreased, the needs of slaves did not, and the costs of possessing slaves became a burden to some owners. Even so, the slaveholding class did not want freed slaves (made so by some of the slaveowners' need to be free of attending to their care) to have access to the same rights as white free men and women, landholding or otherwise. The very bedrock upon which much of Maryland society was built in the 19th century assumed and depended upon the subjugation of slaves, black free men and women, and their

⁹⁰ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 25.

restriction from participating as equals in economic and social arenas of the time.⁹¹

The ruling class wanted to have its cake and eat it too, as evidenced by their desire to even have a free black population at the ready to work in their fields who slaveholders did not have to support when they were not needed, but a populace that could not vote, assemble in large numbers, and whose access to religious freedoms were subject to suspicion (and potential surveillance).⁹²

The criminal justice system was used a means to suppress blacks, both slave and free. In fact, free blacks could be sold back in to slavery if convicted of petty crimes.⁹³ Additionally, there were vigorous campaigns to “encourage” free blacks to repatriate to Liberia, Africa, and they were roundly discouraged from returning to the state once free upon threat of (re)enslavement and/or mob violence, even in ambivalent spaces like Baltimore.⁹⁴ In 1855, still other laws (termed Jacob’s Laws) that sought to expel freed slaves from the state entirely were discussed in the Maryland state legislature.⁹⁵ These efforts to encourage repatriation, expatriation, and to ultimately restrict freed slaves from returning to Maryland were adopted to limit the comingling of black people in bondage with their brothers and sisters who had tasted freedom, even if the freedmen’s and freedwomen’s rights to self-determination were constrained in legal, economic, and social spheres. Free black people in

⁹¹ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century*.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁹³ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 25.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Maryland's middle ground paid dearly for their freedom, and they were often reminded of how fleeting it could be.⁹⁶

However, freed blacks found and created economic niches to occupy within places like Baltimore. Some served as touts at hotels, shouting out persuasive invitations to encourage weary travelers to frequent hotels in the area.⁹⁷ Free black women also sold prepared food on the side of road and at train stations as travelers passed through the city; some referred to themselves as waiter carriers and this could be seen in other parts of the south.⁹⁸ Still other free blacks served as skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled laborers for those who had the means to hire them. Freed blacks also produced their own papers like *The Lyceum Observer*, which was the first published one of its kind "devoted exclusively to blacks in Baltimore."⁹⁹ Freed blacks also became involved in the shipping industry and related ventures (outside of working as caulkers and longshoremen) with the creation of the Chesapeake and Marine Railway and Drydock Company, manufacturing, and other commercial aspects of Baltimore's economy.¹⁰⁰

Even apart from their participation in Baltimore's economic life, freed blacks established rich networks around churches and faith-based organizations that became the pillars of their various communities, even before they were permitted to live in the

⁹⁶ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century*, 35-36.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

⁹⁸ Psyche Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁹⁹ Robert L Vexler, *Baltimore: A Chronological and Documentary History 1632-1970*, American Cities Chronology Series (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1975), 51.

¹⁰⁰ Graham, *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital*, 162, 263.

neighborhoods where their houses of worship were actually located. They founded literary and secret societies, social organizations and groups devoted to the advancement and economic development of free(d) blacks, as well as benevolent societies devoted to the support of those not-yet-free community residents who were in financial and material need.¹⁰¹ Baltimore's 19th century freed blacks honored their military (from the Revolutionary and Civil Wars) and supported separate, black militias (due to racial discrimination).¹⁰² They invested in the establishment and consistent provision for churches and schools revered both in the city and outside of the state of Maryland, and engaged with the debates of the day around slavery, emancipation, and uplift for Baltimore's black citizens as well as those of African descent outside of the state and the country at large.¹⁰³ McDougall argues that "as a result of their efforts against great odds, Baltimore boasted the largest number of freed blacks of any city in the nation on the eve of Emancipation."¹⁰⁴ In light of this, we should consider the idea of Baltimore as a city on a hill. I contend that it was not entirely emblematic of the hate-fueled tensions and tortured ambivalence that ultimately tore the country in two before and during the Civil War, but it did (and arguably does) represent that of a people who stitched its union back together with the bloodied needle and thread of American will; this was also reinforced by the hope of so many freed slaves who desperately made efforts to march towards progress,

¹⁰¹ Graham, *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital*, 259-260, 275, 287, 303-305.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 161, 282.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 261-264, 286, 293.

¹⁰⁴ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 26.

choosing to simply live as free(ly) as they could. This proved more difficult than one might imagine.

Emancipation brought waves of unskilled, newly freed blacks from other parts of Maryland to Baltimore in search of work and a place to call their own home.

However, such a flood of unskilled labor presented several challenges for longstanding Black, free residents of Baltimore and the gains they made in the years leading up to emancipation. Even before emancipation, Black workers, both free and bond for hire, increasingly had to compete with growing numbers of European immigrants entering the labor market, mostly from Germany and Ireland.¹⁰⁵

McDougall highlights that eventually “immigrants drove blacks out of skilled and unskilled jobs with a combination of sharp competitive practices and physical violence.”¹⁰⁶ This is significant in that the white (immigrant) response to Black labor even impacted niches that blacks had occupied with great success. For example, McDougall reports that “prior to 1850, there were virtually no white ship’s caulkers in Baltimore.”¹⁰⁷ However, Black ship’s caulkers, who had “established a reputation for fine workmanship and efficiency,” did organize themselves into a labor association to protect their niche and control of this area of the market.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, riots between Black caulkers and white immigrants who wanted those jobs were recurrent. Whites’ violent resistance was based in part on race and its relationship to the desire to secure a stronghold in the market for their own ranks.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 29.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

Eventually, the Black caulkers' labor organization could not protect its members against the counter organization of their white peers, who convinced joiners and carpenters to strike in protest of the presence of Black caulkers as a labor option for employers.¹¹⁰ Fields gives an account of white caulkers who held Jeremiah P. Skinner, a shipyard owner, and his crew of Black caulkers at gunpoint to terrorize Skinner and his crew and to further their goal to force the use of white laborers as caulkers.¹¹¹ Strike breakers were also fined 25 dollars. Employers came around, firing Black caulkers replacing them with whites.¹¹² The effect this had on Black caulkers, and the Black community overall, could be felt economically, socially, and politically as some of the men who lost their jobs left their families in search of employment opportunities elsewhere; others were labeled as shiftless, lazy loiterers who were considered useless in the absence of an institution like slavery.¹¹³ Dangerously visible, free Black men in search of work were subject to vagrancy laws that intended to enslave or re-enslave them at a benefit to slaveowners and the state; both of which profited from hiring out bonded Black labor before Emancipation.¹¹⁴

Apart from The Knights of Labor (which was defunct by the early 1890s), labor unions were limited to whites and resistant to admitting Black workers.¹¹⁵ While Black workers responded to their exclusion from white only labor unions with the creation of their own unions, they were limited in the ways in which they could

¹¹⁰ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 29-30.

¹¹¹ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century*, 38.

¹¹² McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 30.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

advocate for their members. We can see this with Baltimore's Black caulkers in the 19th century. They had little competition in the market for caulkers prior to 1850, after which their stake in the industry was undermined, strategically and violently, by white, ethnic immigrant workers and their white American counterparts.¹¹⁶

Subsequently, white unions under the umbrella of The American Federation of Labor (AFL) who turned Black workers away later returned with requests for them to join forces in an effort to "bolster their bargaining position with employers."¹¹⁷ Members of the Black community encouraged workers to refuse invitations to join white unions in an effort to make community members more attractive to employers.¹¹⁸ A relatively small percentage of Black workers did join the few white unions that enabled them to participate, with or without autonomy. Examples include the International Hod Carriers and Common Laborers, the Musicians Association, and the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), along with the Amalgamated Cloth Workers (ACW) and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).¹¹⁹ (Some of the invitations and outreach to Black workers came in the early 20th century and before the Great Depression.) However, McDougall points out that other Black workers' refusal to join the ranks of white unions further contributed to their isolation and marginalization in the labor market.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 29-30.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁹ Andor Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, Radical Perspectives (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 24-25.

¹²⁰ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 31-32.

Even so, the wake of emancipation brought serious work challenges for Black Baltimoreans, but also victories as free Blacks agitated for themselves in local (and state) government, rebuffing efforts to institute laws that would disenfranchise them at the polls and in other areas (e.g. the legal ability to practice law, serving on juries).¹²¹ McDougall asserts that as the Reconstruction period came to a close, the Republican party—in control since the Civil War—abandoned its Black supporters, many of whom were loyal in word and deed (read: votes) since emancipation, and southern Democrats seized the opportunity to implement laws that would serve to disenfranchise many Black voters.¹²² He continues that the period between 1890 and the 1930s saw the fewest number of elected Black officials than during the stretch of time between the Civil War and the time of the release of his monograph (1993/the early 1990s).¹²³ However, McDougall affirms that the “political influence of Baltimore’s black community continued almost unabated”¹²⁴:

Like a northern state, Maryland rejected Democratic efforts to disenfranchise blacks. The Maryland legislature passed disenfranchisement amendments in 1904, 1908, and 1911, but these efforts to exclude blacks from the polls were defeated in statewide referendums. Like a southern city, however, Baltimore had a larger number of black residents. These two factors, combined with the high-level, church-centered organization of Baltimore’s black community, account for a degree of black electoral achievement that was unmatched anywhere else in the country. Between 1890 and 1931, six black Republicans held seats on the Baltimore City council, winning thirteen out of eighteen elections during this period.¹²⁵

¹²¹ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 36.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

These gains were important not only in terms of representation, but in terms of what representation could actually afford Black residents of Baltimore, as well as Black people outside of Baltimore. McDougall notes that Black Baltimore councilmen, though small in number, were still able to help propose legislation to enable national black organizations from outside of Baltimore, and Maryland proper, to host annual conventions in public facilities to which white groups had access.¹²⁶ This legislature bucked against the segregationist trends of other parts of the state and made Baltimore stand out as that city on a hill I mentioned previously.

New Hope, Old Struggles: Black People in Baltimore through the Mid-20th Century

As asserted earlier, during the Reconstruction period, Blacks achieved political successes in key areas within Baltimore city. Socially, they strengthened their community and religious institutions and continued with labor agitation and entrepreneurial pursuits, even if several of the latter were unsuccessful in the long-term due to what McDougall argues was (primarily) a lack of capital and Black customers.¹²⁷ As time wore on, the major focus in the community efforts of many Black Baltimoreans shifted to maintaining rights at the ballot box as Reconstruction came to a close; most Black Baltimoreans put their eggs in the W.E.B DuBoisian basket in deference to political power as opposed to the economic self-sufficiency championed by Booker T. Washington.¹²⁸ However, socioeconomic issues and challenges remained, and Black residents of Baltimore dealt with some of the same

¹²⁶ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 37.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-14, 45.

issues that other groups faced with influxes of unskilled labor to their communities. The difference is that they faced these challenges in the midst of segregationist policies that morphed into de facto segregation, while simultaneously struggling with a persistent lack of access to capital and other important resources to absorb waves of people in need of safe, clean housing and fair work.

Like newly freed Blacks from the greater south, unskilled Eastern European Jews made their way to Baltimore. And these unskilled workers stood in contrast to their Jewish brothers and sisters of German provenance, much like Black unskilled migrants did not resemble the free Black population that had been in place in Baltimore since before the Civil War. Jews as a community experienced a more extreme form of exclusion and discrimination in contrast to other European ethnic whites in Baltimore; this was most evident in their exclusion from living in certain areas of the city.¹²⁹ However, even in the face of exclusion and oppression, there were complicated class distinctions and ethnic contradictions within the greater Jewish community in the city based upon emigration that occurred in the 19th century versus that which occurred in the 20th century.¹³⁰ The German Jewish community in Baltimore was established in the mid-nineteenth century, and was firmly in place by the 1920s, as historian Andor Skotnes highlights.¹³¹ He continues that the German Jewish community had “a status similar to that of Baltimore’s large German Christian community; [they] largely spoke English, practiced Reform Judaism, were middle or

¹²⁹ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 28.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 28-29.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 29.

upper class, and lived uptown.”¹³² Their Eastern European counterparts who emigrated later, “spoke Yiddish, were orthodox in religion, were overwhelmingly working class, and lived downtown.”¹³³ These dissimilarities contributed to the lack of “neighborhood-based intercourse” in the daily lives of Baltimore’s Jewish residents during the early 20th century.¹³⁴ Additionally, internal tensions were present within Baltimore’s Jewish community based upon class and work divisions that ran along these lines of provenance: many Eastern European Jews worked in German clothing companies for little pay which contributed to interior class struggles that emerged through union agitation by Eastern European Jews (along with workers from other ethnic groups) within the garment industry.¹³⁵

Even with the class struggles that emerged within Baltimore’s Jewish community, German Jews established philanthropic organizations and associations that provided support to the poorer Eastern Jews who arrived later than they. This support, however, was laced with a “paternalistic” tone that was born of “German Jews’ embarrassment over [their] supposedly less civilized Eastern European” brothers and sisters.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, the Baltimore Jewish community, even with its internal tensions, took care of all its Jewish citizens—its access to (collective) capital made a big difference in shoring up the needs of its members, even if done unequally.¹³⁷ Additionally, Jewish businesses were able to provide a safe haven of

¹³² Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 29.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

sorts to their Orthodox Jewish counterparts to continue with their religious practices, even if marginalized within the greater American narrative and societal norms.¹³⁸ And even while Jews in Baltimore were restricted from living in certain neighborhoods in the city, they also enjoyed greater geographic mobility than that of Blacks living within the municipality.¹³⁹ Furthermore, Jewish citizens created vibrant communities and neighborhoods that provided enduring support to its residents, some of which can be seen in parts of the city in a contemporary context.

In contrast, members of Baltimore's Black community dealt with racial segregation and restrictions as to where they could live past emancipation through the early portion of the 20th century and beyond. These restrictions created and exacerbated issues like overcrowding that lead to poor living conditions, health challenges, and crime, among other issues.¹⁴⁰ The more affluent blacks who could afford to move outside of the confines of the emergent slums were not far away from the issues. They also were not afforded the luxury of distance, physically or psychologically, given their connections to the community through social and religious organizations and the fact that their domiciles were initially only a stone's throw away from that of their brothers and sisters enrobed in poverty and all that it entailed. Land-use ordinances squeezed Baltimore's Black middle class closer and closer to their impoverished brothers and sisters, yet, this confinement of the greater black Baltimorean community helped to set the stage for grassroots protests against

¹³⁸ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 29-30.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 38-39.

racialized, restricted access to diverse housing options, education, public resources, and political representation.

The rise of Jim Crow laws halted and dismantled some of the advancements that Blacks made during the reconstruction period across the South, especially when focused on their housing and geographic mobility. For example, in Baltimore, city land-use ordinances were enacted in 1911 to restrict the housing areas of blacks and ethnic whites, like Jews. In fact, they were the first of their kind, and Louisville, KY along with cities in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia patterned their ordinances off of those implemented in Baltimore.¹⁴¹ In 1917, the U. S. Supreme Court struck down Louisville's ordinance as unconstitutional in *Buchanan vs. Warley*; however, that decision prompted white officials and residents within cities like Baltimore who were wedded to segregation to pursue other means to reach their goals.¹⁴² McDougall recounts the advice that Baltimore's mayor sought once the city's land-use ordinances were struck down:

Baltimore's mayor [J. Barry Mahool] sought advice from Dr. A. K. Warner of Chicago on that city's successful efforts to keep blacks out of white neighborhoods without resorting to zoning legislation. Adopting Chicago's tactics, Baltimore public officials and civic leaders sought to maintain housing segregation through official and unofficial pressure on white owners not to rent or sell to blacks, and through slum clearance measures. Local government officials, real estate agents, lending institutions, and private homeowners joined in the conspiracy to keep Baltimore's black population confined to deteriorating central-city neighborhoods.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Garrett Power, "Apartheid Baltimore Style: The Residential Segregation Ordinances of 1910-1913," *Maryland Law Review* 42 (1983): 289.

¹⁴² McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 46-47.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47. McDougall uses a quote from Garrett Power, 314-315.

Additionally, federal government programs aimed at promoting home ownership were habitually closed to Black citizens of Baltimore (as well as Black residents of other American cities).

The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), established during the New Deal, “promoted and insured long-term, low-interest home mortgages in Baltimore’s lily-white suburbs.”¹⁴⁴ Additionally, the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 authorized the Veteran’s Administration (VA) to back mortgage loans to veterans that did not require a down payment.¹⁴⁵ In speaking of the growth of the “owner-occupied housing market share,” McDougall also asserts that while this trend was on the rise, “the FHA and VA actually *required* [emphasis is the author’s] racially restrictive covenants—to protect the ‘property’ values of homes they insured. They also refused to insure mortgages in black areas, imitating the early ‘redlining’ practices of several banks.”¹⁴⁶ Michael Casiano’s work, *Broken City: Race, Property, and Culture* explores and analyzes the “discourse of black deviance” in the late 19th and 20th centuries, and how they “account for Jim Crow-era investments in disciplining black Baltimoreans and white desires to justify residential exclusion.”¹⁴⁷ Casiano highlights practices of systemized exclusion through racial covenants where Black people could be labeled as a “nuisance.” He describes this practice as “a legal maneuver that allowed developers and white homeowners to categorize black people as a hazardous

¹⁴⁴ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 48.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Michael Casiano, “Broken City: Race, Property, and Culture,” abstract (PhD diss., College Park, MD, 2018).

land use whose exclusion was protected under property rights.”¹⁴⁸ In sum, federal and local government (as well as that of the state), colluded with interested white citizens to limit the economic and geographic mobility of Blacks in Baltimore and different locations across America, not just its southern region.¹⁴⁹

The aforementioned challenges concerning access to housing outside of restricted areas was compounded by the push and pull of economic forces after World War II. While federal, state, and local governments supported white veterans and their families as they moved to the suburbs, they also supported important infrastructure (e.g. roads) that enabled them to travel to and from their safe, middle class enclaves to work sites and opportunities in the port of Baltimore city.¹⁵⁰ Conversely, Black Baltimoreans were not only denied access to those suburban enclaves, they were also roundly shut out of different economic opportunities near those enclaves due to lack of access to adequate transportation and the presence of racialized union bias.¹⁵¹

These restrictions eroded some of the freedoms and successes gained in the two to three decades after Reconstruction. Yet, burgeoning Jim Crow laws, the feudal sharecropping system in rural areas of the south, and white, violent aggression that roared against Black communities served as a motivator at critical times in the first few decades of the 20th century to mobilize Blacks to fight back (politically and

¹⁴⁸ Casiano, "Broken City: Race, Property, and Culture," abstract.

¹⁴⁹ The University of Maryland's iSchool launched a project to map Baltimore's redlining practices in the previous century:

<http://dcicblog.umd.edu/redliningbaltimore/baltimore-map/>

¹⁵⁰ McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 49.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 50.

economically), and to put a spotlight on the horrors of homegrown terrorism against Black people. Black Baltimoreans interested in fighting against the oppressive structures and blockades erected in opposition to their progress strengthened during the period after Reconstruction through the 1910s. They also found advocates in what may have initially appeared as some of the unlikeliest of groups: communists and socialists, mostly from the north. This could be understood through the rise of socialist and communist political activity in Black communities, and it was due in part to their acceptance of Blacks—at least in theory—as equals.

The Republican party of Lincoln did little to advance the rights of Black citizens as the Reconstruction period ebbed, and its members actively sought to distance themselves from Black supporters moving into the 20th century. The growing frustration and alienation of blacks in Baltimore (and other parts of the American south) found an outlet in socialist and communist agendas that advocated for laborers' rights, regardless of skin color and gender, especially those in the labor force's rank and file. Some black elites were ambivalent, even with growing frustration with the Republican party, due to the history with the party before, during, and after the Civil War. Nonetheless, Black labor groups rallied to advocate economically and politically for themselves, with the help of their white, liberal compatriots in the north and Midwest; arguably, Black citizens found more substantive support in the form of live local, present bodies and listening ears from socialist and communist groups looking to join forces than they had from the Republican party during Reconstruction and beyond. In fact, the Community Party (CP) in Baltimore maintained, "as no

predominately White organization in the region had ever done before, that antiracism had to be integral to every struggle.”¹⁵²

Skotnes catalogued in his book *A New Deal for All?: Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore* the many barriers that Black people faced to political and economic equality in Baltimore in the first few decades of the 20th century. Yet, Black residents of Baltimore did not tacitly accept the status quo; through activism and community mobilization they laid the foundation for even more political and social agitation in later decades, from the (latter period of the) civil rights and black power movements of 1950s, 60s, and 70s, to the protests and unrest in the 1990s and 2000s. In exploring the race and class struggles of the Depression era, Skotnes draws our attention to the “civil rights unionism” that emerged in places like Baltimore contemporaneously with the rise of modern industrial unionism.¹⁵³ This is significant as Skotnes contends at the time he released his work in 2012, few historians had “investigated the African American movement, based in the neighborhood and public spheres, during the years after the Great Crash of 1929,” a time period before the previously established civil rights movement of the 1950s.¹⁵⁴ He goes on to argue that “a powerful, mass-based Black freedom movement emerged from the multi-class African-American neighborhoods of Baltimore, and of Maryland, during the Depression, helping to resuscitate and transform the national freedom movement.”¹⁵⁵ This is important as he and other historians started to

¹⁵² Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 46-47.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

establish that the Civil Rights Movement did not begin after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision.¹⁵⁶ It began as early as the Depression era with definitive links to the workers' movement among other social movements, especially in Baltimore.¹⁵⁷

Before the Great Crash of 1929, Skotnes notes that the Black freedom movement in Baltimore was comprised of organizations devoted to "economic betterment" organizations and those dedicated to "political-judicial change."¹⁵⁸ There were Black trade unions, Black women's organizations like the Cooperative Women's Civic League (CWCL) and the Housewives League (HL), the Baltimore branches of the Urban League (BUL), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the latter emerging out of predecessors that successfully advocated for political and legal progress for Blacks in Baltimore. The NAACP, as Skotnes asserts, "was heir to a local tradition of protest extending back to the Mutual Brotherhood of Liberty, organized in 1885, which worked successfully to overturn 'Black Laws,' admit Black lawyers to the bar, and open Black schools to Black teachers."¹⁵⁹ Even with the political importance of the NAACP, Skotnes contends that the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper "was the

¹⁵⁶ One could argue that it is no coincidence that Thurgood Marshall, a Baltimore native, was involved in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision as a civil rights litigator. He arguably "cut his teeth" on civil rights agitation with his involvement in a variety of civil rights organizations and initiatives, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

¹⁵⁷ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 4.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

center of the community's political culture."¹⁶⁰ The scene, he argues, was not a mass-movement before the Great Depression and the era of the New Deal.¹⁶¹

At the beginning of the 1930s, we see a freedom movement developing in the aftermath of de facto racial segregation, the continued practice of the extrajudicial lynchings of Black people across the south, and continued battles for equality in the labor market. Black segments of Baltimore, especially the middle class, successfully advocated to get Black jurors on the rolls, and for voting rights, and the ability for Black teachers to teach in the city, but there were still barriers that prevented large segments of Black Baltimore from securing employment in different industries, especially in those that required skilled laborers. The legacy of being forced out of skilled (and unskilled) labor professions with the proliferation of white European immigration in the middle to late 19th century, had a profound impact on Black workers in Baltimore.¹⁶² It is with this backdrop that we return to the emergence and appeal of the communist and socialist groups and affiliated labor organizations in Baltimore.

Lynchings was another important source of rallying cries from Black communities, where miscarriages of justice were enabled by the judicial and law enforcement arms of the state in allowing armed mobs to brutally murder accused but-not-yet-convicted Black people. I argue the fact that lynchings were on the rise in the late 19th and early portion of the 20th century, along with the proliferation of Jim

¹⁶⁰ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 37.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁶² McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, 30.

Crow laws across the south is not a coincidence. Blacks put public political pressure on white politicians and law enforcement officials and personnel (judges, police, and sheriffs) to stem the growing tide of these brutal extrajudicial slayings of Black people. Though initially unsuccessful at stopping the ruthlessly, violent public murders, Black communities could draw attention to those deaths—the injustices of them—and stir their base to protest.

Skotnes opens the fifth chapter of “A New Deal for All” with Donald’s Smith’s poem about the 1933 lynching of the Maryland Eastern Shore’s George Armwood. Later in the poem, after highlighting the failure of the law in Armwood’s lynching, Smith clearly advocates for retaliation to the brutality imposed upon this member of the Black community:

Our race must now retaliate
Lynchland, that’s Maryland.
And teach our children they should hate
Lynchland, that’s Maryland.
If they must lynch, let us lynch too
And burn our victims as they do
We’ll give the state the name its due
Lynchland, that’s Maryland.¹⁶³

Smith hearkened others to an understandable desire for physical violence as the form of collective retaliation for the lynchings of Black people. However, though the anger stirred in the Black community over lynchings was frequent, there was not a sustained and systemic effort to prevent them through legislation and other means apart from violence. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had all but retreated from its anti-lynching efforts in Maryland after the

¹⁶³ Donald Smith, Afro-American, October 28, 1933, quoted in Andor Skotnes, *A New Deal for All?: Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 119.

defeat of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill and leading up to Armwood's brutal murder. But, his death reinvigorated their base and cause, inciting Baltimore activists like the NAACP's Clarence Mitchell, the older brother of Parren Mitchell,¹⁶⁴ to report on Armwood's murder after rushing to the Eastern Shore to ensure that this atrocity would be made known to others.¹⁶⁵ The importance of Baltimore's *Afro-American* as a vital source of information about critical events like Armwood's murder should not be understated.

Skotnes notes that the "broadest spectrum of Black community forces in decades, joined by significant numbers of progressive and radical Whites, mobilized to protest the lynching and to demand that the murderers be brought to justice."¹⁶⁶ He continues that this protest was "far larger, more inclusive, and more effective than those following the lynching of Matthew Williams in 1931, [and] the protests provided a gauge of how much the Baltimore freedom movement had revived in two short years... The anti-lynching protests consolidated the gains of the movement of the early Depression years, reconfigured the forces involved, and took the movement to a higher level."¹⁶⁷ This had implications on the national front, being that organizations like the NAACP had a following outside of Maryland, and wanted to

¹⁶⁴ Parren Mitchell successfully sued to be the first African-American man admitted to a University of Maryland-College Park graduate program. He was also the first African-American congressman from Maryland since Reconstruction (McDougall, 43).

¹⁶⁵ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 120. Skotnes recounts that Clarence Mitchell interviewed local white residents and officials, "forced his way into the coroner's inquest on the lynching," informed Armwood's mother of her son's brutal murder by lynch mob, and helped with the burial of Armwood's mutilated remains, 124.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 120.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

draw attention to lynching as a national issue that needed to be addressed.¹⁶⁸ The Baltimore protests to Armwood's lynching revived the NAACP's interest in its anti-lynching campaign, and restored its Baltimore branch of the organization.¹⁶⁹ According to Skotnes, the reinvigoration of the Baltimore freedom movement(s) around lynchings ended one phase of movement building in the 1930s.¹⁷⁰

As Skotnes maintains, racialized lynchings were seen as tradition, and they served to "terrorize the African American population, to discourage resistance, and thereby facilitate the reproduction of the segregation system...they were [also] a grisly affirmation of absolute White supremacy and of White community identity."¹⁷¹ Skotnes also asserts that lynchings served as a specific type of outlet for the white people who participated in and/or observed them: "During periods like the early Depression, racialized lynchings displaced the anger and distress felt by the general White population over deteriorating conditions away from ruling White elites, and, in a violent spasm of White solidarity, toward the Black population."¹⁷² However, the result, at least for residents of Baltimore in regards to Armwood's lynching, was not to shrink in fear, but to protest such a heinous event.¹⁷³ Additionally, support for the protests came from both within the Black community in Baltimore and from without.

Organizations like the International Labor Defense (ILD), the Communist Party (CP), the Forum, the Socialist Party of Maryland, the Baltimore Urban League

¹⁶⁸ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 120.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 125.

(BUL), and the People's Unemployment League of Maryland (PUL) spoke out against Armwood's lynching in official statements.¹⁷⁴ Other local, nonpolitical African-American organizations also protested, including the African Methodist Episcopal Preachers' Meeting, the Chi Delta Mu medical fraternity, and The Ministers Wives' Association of the South Baltimore District of the Washington Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁷⁵ A group of 45 Black Baptist ministers joined the fray "claiming to represent 50,000 Black Baptists and 'the whole Negro body of the Negro population of Maryland'"; they made religious appeals as well as demands of political and law enforcement officials:¹⁷⁶

...the ministers delivered a resolution that asked God to condemn all officials implicated in the lynching and all the members of the mob. They also demanded that all responsible for the lynching be prosecuted, that every state official involved in returning Armwood to the Eastern Shore be impeached, and that state law be changed to ensure that a lynching never happen in Maryland again; they also demanded that the State Police, at that time totally Jim Crow, be required to recruit Black Officers. The ministers told [then Governor Albert] Ritchie, 'Your explanation in the press as to your position and power in the matter is not savory, to say the least.' According to the *Afro [-American]*, Ritchie was visibly shaken and took an hour to defend himself.¹⁷⁷

Many African-Americans in the legal profession, including a young Thurgood Marshall, advocated for a Maryland anti-lynching law, as well as a federal law against lynching.¹⁷⁸ The collective protests and calls for anti-lynching laws continued with an interracial chorus of groups speaking out in the aftermath of Armwood's

¹⁷⁴ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 125.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 126

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

murder. Black and liberal white denizens of Baltimore came together to promote a campaign against lynching, while still others advocated for the release of Euel Lee, an African-American who was accused and convicted of murdering a white family in Worcester county (on Maryland's Eastern Shore). Requests for appeals on behalf of Lee were denied up to and including the U.S. Supreme Court, and he was hanged at the Maryland Penitentiary in Baltimore on October 28, 1933—10 days after Armwood's murder.¹⁷⁹ The protests in the wake of Armwood's lynching did not stay Lee's execution as some hoped it would, however, Skotnes asserts that mass mobilization around an anti-lynching agenda ensued in various forms, including protest meetings, small-scale demonstrations, and engage with local government.¹⁸⁰

Additional initiatives focused not only on anti-lynching laws but on better access to jobs. Prominent Baltimore educator, lawyer, and activist Juanita Jackson Mitchell noted that Black people could not work in the communities in which they lived, specifically referencing the all-too-common phenomena of white people working at stores and businesses in majority-Black communities.¹⁸¹ Black people wanted the opportunity to work where they shopped, especially given the economic pressure(s) caused by the Great Depression. In 1933, the "Buy Where You Can Work" movement began to take root in Baltimore, and Black locals were encouraged to steer their (precious) money towards businesses where they had access to employment. Kiowa Costonie, a charismatic yet uncharacteristically humble faith

¹⁷⁹ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 127.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

healer and prophet from out of town, shaped and spurred the Buy Where You Can Work movement with fiery sermons and appeals for Black residents of Baltimore to focus on their own betterment, economically and spiritually, and some might even argue politically so (e.g. with his efforts to promote voter registration).¹⁸² Without a satisfactory response to demands to hire Black workers at white-owned establishments in Black neighborhoods, Costonie made the call for boycotts and picketing to pressure white-owned establishments to employ Black residents.

Successively, boycotts were launched in front of A & P stores in different Black neighborhoods in Baltimore, as well as stores on the 1700 block of Pennsylvania Avenue. However, tensions within factions of agitators working on behalf of Baltimore's Black city dwellers threatened efforts to move forward with a cohesive agenda in this area. Some of the old guard and elite were uncomfortable with what appeared to be a handout in securing jobs for Black workers by this means, and publicly made their dissent known, while other members of the elite supported the boycott and its agenda.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, boycotts and picketing moved forward, and Black residents enjoyed some important successes, including A & Ps hiring Black sales clerks and managers. The movement also fought legal challenges to their picketing and boycotting, especially since their agitation advocated for Black workers to be hired and the workers themselves, all white before the boycotting began, were not the ones picketing and lobbying for workers' rights in this context. In 1934, the law did not support striking and boycotting to secure labor rights and access to

¹⁸² Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 144-150.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 151.

employment along racial lines; the Norris-LaGuardia Act (1932) was interpreted as only covering economic disputes (e.g. workers' strikes) until 1938 when the Supreme Court ruled that striking to combat racialized economic injustice was permitted under the act as well.¹⁸⁴

Additionally, friction arose over Costonie's behavior in relation to women in the community, the source of his financial support, as well as whether or not he was truly a faith healer.¹⁸⁵ He also stood in the minority as it concerned advancing towards Black economic self-sufficiency through entrepreneurship.¹⁸⁶ In the end, Costonie left town (with a few women from the City-Wide Young People's Forum in tow), with the Buy Where You Can Work movement championed by the mother and daughter team, Lillie Jackson and Juanita Jackson (who would become Juanita Jackson Mitchell) of the Citizen's Committee and the Forum, respectively.¹⁸⁷

Consequently, while Black protestors and agitators received support from some white liberals in their anti-lynching campaign, that support was limited and slow to emerge for the Buy Where You Can Work movement that came to prominence around the same time. Skotnes marks this lack of support for the jobs boycott as a telling one in contrast to the support given for anti-lynching protest:

All in all, the contrast between White progressive support for the anti-lynching protests and the relative dearth of such support for the jobs boycott is revealing. It most likely stemmed from White social liberal misgivings over African American direct action, which may have been perceived as anti-White. Also, it is possible that some of the White storeowners traveled in

¹⁸⁴ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 153, 156.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

circles close to those of some of the social liberals. The boycott crossed a line uncomfortably close to home.¹⁸⁸

The discomfort which Skotnes references is one that should not be ignored, especially in considering the limitations of collaborations as far as personal and collective interests extend. This is also important to ponder when contemplating and exploring the efforts of future, Black activists in Baltimore (e.g. Natur), and elsewhere.

Baltimore and Black Power: Activism and Political Agitation from the Mid-20th Century through the 1970s

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, African-Americans continued with political anti-racist agitation. Notably, in 1954, African-Americans received word of the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision in favor of desegregation (argued by none other than Baltimore's own Thurgood Marshall), along with news of the cruel murder of 14-year-old Emmet Till the following year. Subsequently, Black Americans also bore witness to the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, along with their subsequent assassinations as they made salient shifts in their foci and rhetoric. All the while, there was a local presence and continuing activism by organizations already established in places like Baltimore. Members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and additional leaders who later would be affiliated with the black power movement, including but not limited to the Black Panthers, consistently

¹⁸⁸ Skotnes, *A New Deal for All? : Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, 159.

pressed for ways to help Black residents of the city. This occurred even before the riots of 1968, which ensued in the aftermath of King's assassination.

Historian Rhonda Y. Williams gives a useful synopsis of the work that Black activists and community members undertook in Baltimore in the time period between the 1930s and mid 1960s, before CORE adopted Baltimore as a "Target City" for its new, black power infused, initiative:

From the 1930s through mid-1966, Baltimore's black civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had pushed for equal teacher salaries, engaged in Don't Buy Where You Can't Work campaigns, targeted segregation in public accommodations, challenged restrictive covenants, fought for low-income black housing, and successfully fought to integrate the University of Maryland Law School. In 1942, 2,000 people marched to Annapolis to protest police brutality. In the early to mid-1950s, the NAACP also led campaigns that resulted in the integration...of municipal parks and swimming pools. In other words, local black civil rights leaders did have numerous success in their efforts to legally dismantle Jim Crow. They secured jobs, access to public accommodations, as well as government appointments in the 1950s under then Governor (and in 1966 Mayor) [Theodore R.] McKeldin. Baltimore CORE activists also held antisegregation protests long before the idea of something called a Target City emerged; the Baltimore CORE chapter formed in 1953. Between then and the early 1960s, local CORE activists challenged Jim Crow by participating in the early 1960s' Freedom Rides and desegregation efforts along Interstate Route 40.¹⁸⁹

Williams also provides insight on the changing winds in Baltimore in the mid 1960s, leading up to the 1968 uprising. She sets the stage for understanding these changes in Baltimore (and the nation) through comments given by New York congressman, Baptist pastor, and activist, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.:

On February 27, 1966, Rep. Adam Clayton Powell spoke at a Fourth District Democratic Organization's \$15-a-plate fundraiser held in the ballroom of the

¹⁸⁹ Rhonda Y. Williams, "The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966-1968," in *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, ed. Peniel E Joseph (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 218-219.

Lord Baltimore Hotel. The black organization was a major political club in west Baltimore's predominately black Fourth District. Alongside criticizing middle-class black people for being more concerned with cotillions, sipping martinis in suburban homes, and distancing themselves from their 'deprived black brothers and sisters,' the black New York congressman told the 1,000 attendees at the posh affair, 'If there is one thing in which I believe, it is the pursuit of audacious power....I would urge black people in America to pursue audacious power—the power to make decisions with control the affairs of your city and your state.' Dressed in a blue suit and chain-smoking, Powell continued, 'All my life I have pursued audacious power...and it has upset many of my good white friends...you see, very few white people can accept us when we move out of our prisons of shoe-shuffling, head-bowed, Uncle Tomism.'¹⁹⁰

According to Williams, CORE held its 23rd annual conference in Baltimore only a month after civil rights workers chanted "black power" along "inhospitable" roadways in Mississippi.¹⁹¹ She notes that CORE convention attendees "celebrated the achievements of 'Freedom Now' and outlined its next objective—'black power' or 'self-sufficiency and an end to dependence on the white community.'"¹⁹² Black power as a concept was debated both within and outside of Black communities. Specifically, Williams asserts that "black power in Baltimore, as throughout the country, evoked excitement, trepidation, uncertainty, and criticism from within and outside black activist circles and black communities."¹⁹³

CORE shifted its strategy to organizing Black people within inner cities, and Baltimore was its first "target."¹⁹⁴ Williams offers us a useful information about what

¹⁹⁰ Rhonda Y. Williams, "The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966-1968," in *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, ed. Peniel E Joseph (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 218-219, 215.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 216.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

black power meant in terms of aims in different Black communities and activist circles: “Black power meant shoring up black manhood, advocating self-defense, seeking self-determination, exercising political power, attacking discrimination in education, employment, housing, and welfare, challenging entrenched white and black leaders, and mobilizing poor black people to transform society.”¹⁹⁵ And she contends that at the center of black power was an “evocation of community...that served as a basis for challenging unjust and equal power relationships.”¹⁹⁶ The politics of place and the flavor of local politics are important in any efforts to understand community struggles for power.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, in her categorization of the “way up south,” Williams proffers that Baltimore, “the northernmost border city below the Mason-Dixon Line,...became a staging ground, like many inner cities for the competing politics of more militant black activists, white segregationists, municipal state officials, and establishment civil rights leaders.”¹⁹⁸ However, black people in Baltimore were seen as less likely to resort to violence, even in the wake of heightened political activity. This may have been why CORE chose the city as its first target in its new initiative.

Quoting Thurgood Marshall from a 1966 New York Times article, Williams cites Baltimore’s “way-up south” character as “decent and even occasionally progressive in many of the official forms of race relations in the last 20 years, but

¹⁹⁵ Williams, *The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966-1968*, 216.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 216-217.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 217.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

patrician and aloof in their substance.”¹⁹⁹ In the years leading up to the 1968 uprising, the climate in Baltimore (and other parts of Maryland) was charged, especially around efforts by Black resident-activist and external activist allies (both Black and white) to agitate for better housing, job opportunities, and pay, along with greater access to political representation and public spaces. This agitation, especially when perceived as being championed by black power activists, was met with a variety of responses by state officials, local law enforcement, and white residents of Baltimore and other parts of the state. They ranged from sympathy and ambivalence to physical violence and aggression.

In addition to national organizations like CORE and SNCC, other local organizations adopted what could be considered a Black Power stance to challenge the economic and political status quos, even within the activist leadership of their own communities. Union for Jobs or Income Now (U-JOIN), Maryland Freedom Union (MFU), Tenants for Justice, and Mother Rescuers from Poverty were groups that worked to advocate for the economic rights of poor and working class Black people living in the city. And while battling Jim Crow for voting rights, the ability to occupy any seat on bus, and the ability to (gain) access to other restricted spaces were important, Williams notes that “fewer housing opportunities, schools in need of greater resources, rising crime and drugs, a dwindling tax base, deindustrialization and a lack of living wage jobs, and increased economic and residential segregation”

¹⁹⁹ Williams, *The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966-1968*, 216.

would not be immediately addressed by the aforesaid actions.²⁰⁰ Members of these groups labored for opportunities that would impact their peers in the here and now. For example, activists from U-JOIN, Mother Rescuers from Poverty, Activists for Fair Housing, Inc., SNCC, and CORE, worked for greater control/stake and representation of poor Black people in the decision making process and oversight of the Model Cities (grant) program.²⁰¹ Model Cities was a federally-funded Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program that sought to emphasize the “social, economic, and physical renewal of blight neighborhoods” with an imperative to attract root causes for said blight.²⁰²

It is an understatement to say that there were tensions in Baltimore (and in greater Maryland) before the uprising of 1968. White segregationists embraced violent threats and other provocations to combat the activism of Black people in Baltimore and beyond. After at least one of the white supremacist and segregationist rallies hosted by the National States Rights Party (NSRP), there were instances of gangs of white youths roaming through the streets of east Baltimore’s Black neighborhoods, yelling racial epithets and attacking residents on the street; there were also instances of klansmen and klanswomen counter protesting where Blacks protested and picketed for greater economic and political rights, including demonstrations to integrate public housing complexes.²⁰³ A few white segregationists,

²⁰⁰ Rhonda Y. Williams, “Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.

²⁰¹ Williams, *The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966-1968*, 230-231.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 230.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 222, 227.

one of whom championed the idea that segregation was not enough and dreamed “of seeing ‘every nigger hang from a lamppost,’” went to prison on riot charges.²⁰⁴ Yet still, the 1968 uprising highlighted continuing challenges and the shifting winds. Gone were the days of the white, moderate local governance of Theodore McKeldin and Thomas D’Alessandro, III; they transitioned to that of Spiro T. Agnew, a conservative former Baltimore mayor and Maryland governor whose fiery rebukes of Black activists (regardless of where they fell on the black power spectrum) drew the attention of none other than Richard Nixon.²⁰⁵

Black power appeared to give even greater voice to disaffected Black residents of Baltimore who did not see the kind of change and improvements that would adequately combat entrenched social and economic immobility. Williams notes that “organizing around the daily concerns and igniting the political passions of everyday people, particularly the most forgotten and demonized, were critical goals of activists who harnessed black power politics.”²⁰⁶ Consequently, many members of the local and multi-vocal black power movement advocated for poor, Black residents of Baltimore, with campaigns devoted to making visible those who were invisible and marginalized. Additionally, the rise of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Baltimore tapped into the desire of Black people to act on their own behalf both offensively and defensively, and with force if necessary as it concerned the latter. The Baltimore chapter of the BPP was opened in the city in 1967, just one year after the national

²⁰⁴ Williams, *The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966-1968*, 223.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 233-235.

²⁰⁶ Williams, “The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966-1968,” 224.

party was established in Oakland, California. The BPP enlisted men and women as members, though the organization's image was overwhelmingly associated with strong (read: tough), Black men. Even so, women helped with different parts of the organization, including its administration; they were also subject to the same abuse that their male counterparts received from law enforcement. In 1969, the Baltimore BPP took a more "aggressive militaristic strategy" even as the national organization sought to emphasize community-based programming.²⁰⁷ By April 1970, arrests by the police and infiltration weakened and destabilized the Baltimore chapter of the BPP.²⁰⁸ Several of Baltimore's members faced charges for the murder of (Baltimore) Officer Donald Sager and an "agent provocateur."²⁰⁹ One such member was the Baltimore BPP's Defense Minister, Marshall "Eddie" Conway, who was convicted for the murder of Officer Donald Sager. Conway was sentenced to life in prison in 1970, and was released in 2014 as the instructions given to his jury were unconstitutional.²¹⁰

During this time of Black power activism and politics, an emphasis on cultural appreciation and nationalism was also embraced by activists in Baltimore. Benjamin "Olugbala" McMillian, a CORE member, opened the Soul School next to the Murphy Homes public housing project in west Baltimore. Williams reports that "Soul School members focused on the artistic and literary contributions of black people, black consciousness, pride, the 'collective psyche,' and their relationship to black

²⁰⁷ Williams, "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power," 89.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ Williams, "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power," 89-90.

²¹⁰ Conway served 44 years in prison, maintaining his innocence the entire time.

freedom.”²¹¹ The school provided educational programming and an outlet for participants to create art, and was unabashedly built upon an ideology that cast white people as oppressors. The cultural appreciation component, along with McMillan’s and his counterparts’ stance on white oppression, are important, organic pieces that connect the past with the future, particularly where it concerns Natur and his peers.

²¹¹ Williams, “Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power,” 86.

Chapter 3: Natur's Story

Fight if you have to fight. Took martial arts. Model life to not really fight. Had weapons where I needed to defend myself. I didn't get in one fight in high school. That's a skill—learning how to control your vibe...²¹² –*Jabari Natur*

This chapter explores the life and world of Jabari Natur, from his childhood to his “awakening” and involvement in a community that nurtured him and provided him with the room to establish Watoto from the Nile, a Hip Hop group comprised of all Black girls. His evolution stemmed in part from the attention he paid to his vibe (i.e. the attitude he emanated in his interactions with others), his flow, and how he related to other people. As I explore his transition it is important to remember that before Natur was introduced to an African-centered way of thinking, he was still concerned with how he interacted with others and how he should carry himself in order to achieve his goals, however short term.

Natur, the creator and manager of Watoto, was born less than a decade after the Baltimore uprising of 1968, and his life provides a ground-level view of Baltimore as it marched—slowly but surely—towards deindustrialization and the ravaging effects of Ronald Reagan's far-reaching neoliberal campaign, which included his war on drugs. This drug war, for which Baltimore is known, is not just for the body counts but for the war's retelling through the tinged media lens of Home Box Office's (HBO) *The Wire* (2002-2008), and its predecessors, *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-1999), and *The Corner* (a mini-series that aired in 2000). This chapter also explores how Natur pursues a message of hope in the aftermath of this

²¹² Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, May 11, 2015, Baltimore, Maryland.

current neoliberal moment. Hip Hop and his work with Watoto are some of Natur's answers. Entrepreneurship and fostering creativity in young people are others. This chapter also broaches the challenges that Natur and Watoto face in pursuing the aforesaid within contemporary Baltimore city.

Baltimore city stood and continues to stand at an important crossroads of sorts, and as such, arguably occupies critical space in the American imagination. Sheri Parks, Phoebe Stein, and M. Carruthers make this point in their forthcoming monograph, *Baltimore Stories: Narrative and the Life of an American City*. It has taken up more space with the turbulent uprising in 2015 after the death of Freddie Gray. As outlined in chapter two of this work, Baltimore has a rich cultural, political, and economic history, steeped in the cultural production, and political and economic agitation of so many Black residents from generations past and present.

Yet, I must still consider the artistic and educational contributions by predecessors, progenitors, and successors of the Black Arts Movement and Black radicalism. This exploration is vital to understanding Natur and Watoto as heirs to the struggle for freedom not just in word and deed, but in form.

The Black Arts and Independent Education Movements

In 1978, Nina Simone, an African-American jazz singer, soul singer, and an activist for civil rights, sang a cover of Randy Newman's song titled, "Baltimore," just one year after he released it on his own album:

Beat-up little seagull
On a marble stair
Tryin' to find the ocean
Lookin' everywhere

Hard times in the city
In a hard town by the sea
Ain't nowhere to run to
There ain't nothin' here for free

Waiting for a train
Drunk lying on the sidewalk
Sleeping in the rain

And the people hide their faces
And they hide their eyes
'Cause the city's dyin'
And they don't know why

Oh, Baltimore
Ain't it hard just to live?
Oh, Baltimore
Ain't it hard just to live?
Just to live

Get my sister Sandy
And my little brother Ray
Buy a big old wagon
To haul us all away

Live out in the country
Where the mountain's high
Never gonna come back here
Till the day I die

Oh, Baltimore
Ain't it hard just to live?
Oh, Baltimore

Ain't it hard just to live?
Just to live²¹³

²¹³ Randy Newman. Performed by Nina Simone, "Baltimore." Brussels: 1978, CTI
Accessed at
https://play.google.com/music/preview/Txsyb525hcxzqdigssko7bxvbkq?lyrics=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-lyrics, July 26, 2016

Simone's rendering of the song, is one that may be just as compelling today as it may have been 40 years ago.²¹⁴ Simone represents the ability for art to speak to the conditions of life, particularly that of Black lives in pursuit of freedom, and the liberatory power that art possesses.

Eleanora Fagan, a predecessor of Simone more commonly known as Billie Holiday or Lady Day, is a musical giant who spent her tumultuous and unstable formative years in Baltimore city, a city teeming with Black musical/cultural history and talent. Born in Philadelphia in 1915, Holiday moved to Baltimore with her mother, who was originally from the city. The victim of physical abuse, rape and sexual abuse, child prostitution, and incarceration during her formative years, Holiday resolved to pursue a career other than prostitution and domestic work after she was released from a workhouse in New York in 1929.²¹⁵ She loved music, and was able to secure a "serious jazz apprenticeship at after-hours joints and jam sessions" in Harlem after her release.²¹⁶ Molded by her time in Baltimore and Harlem, Holiday in turn, helped to shape the American pop-cultural landscape through her (cultural) production as a blues-influenced jazz performer and self-proclaimed "race woman."²¹⁷ In expressing her convictions, she sang "Strange Fruit," its lyrics penned

²¹⁴ It was covered again by Jazmin Sullivan for a 2015 Netflix documentary about Simone titled, "What Happened, Miss Simone?". You may access the Vevo audio version here: [https://www.vevo.com/watch/jazmine-sullivan/baltimore-\(audio\)/USRV81500574](https://www.vevo.com/watch/jazmine-sullivan/baltimore-(audio)/USRV81500574)

²¹⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 24.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Angela Y. Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 162. Originally quoted from John Chilton's "Billie's Blues: The Billie Holiday Story. New York: Stein & Day, 1978, 69.

by the poet Lewis Allan, and in so doing, endeavored to bring attention to the brutality of American racism and the “bitter fruit” it produced and harvested year after year:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulgin’ eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burnin’ flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop²¹⁸

It was said that Holiday never sang the song the same way twice, but when she crooned the words, it was a clarion call to imagine the horror and brutality of terroristic racism in America:

While she never sang “Strange Fruit” exactly the same way twice, each time Holiday performed it she implicitly asked her audiences to imagine a dreadful lynching scene, and to endorse and identify with the song’s antilynching sentiments. Yet her performance of this song did much more. It almost singlehandedly changed the politics of American popular culture and put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture. The felt impact of Holiday’s performance of “Strange Fruit” is as powerful today as it was in the 1940s.²¹⁹

Holiday provided an opportunity for her audiences, comprised of Blacks and whites over time, to approach the gravity of this imagery in spaces previously reserved for

²¹⁸ Written by Dwayne P. Wiggins, Maurice Pearl, Lewis Allan • Copyright © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., Universal Music Publishing Group

²¹⁹ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 183-184.

leisure. Her roles as an artist and a race woman helped to lay the foundation for future artists to continue to marry their musical gifts and talents to matters of social justice and import:

By transforming Lewis Allen's [sic] poem into an unsettling protest song and making it so central to her repertoire that it became her signature work, Holiday pioneered a tradition later taken up by musicians like Nina Simone [and Watoto from the Nile], who would unabashedly incorporate into their musical creations explicit social critiques.²²⁰

It is also critical to note that Holiday's decision to embrace her role as a "race woman" cost her dearly. Her association with the song "Strange Fruit" opened her up to scrutiny from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), including the decision to start a file on Holiday before she began to use heroin.²²¹ Along with exposure in pursuit of social consciousness and aware, Baltimore is also a thread here, and it is one that ties and links the work of people like Jabari Natur and Watoto from the Nile to musical and cultural titans like Holiday (and Simone) in meaningful ways. Two of Watoto's members video-recorded their rendition of A.L.O.R.A.G.E.'s iterative spoken word performance also titled, "Strange Fruit."²²² A.L.O.R.A.G.E. is another Baltimore group committed to promoting a message of Black self-love and community unity. Watoto's selection of that song to sing is not an accident—it is meant to move and spur its listeners to action, just as in times past.

As discussed in chapter two, the foment around the Black Power movement helped to spur and fuel resources that extended not only into activism in the form of

²²⁰ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 196.

²²¹ Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 25.

²²² A.L.O.R.A.G.E. stands for Anointed Ladies of R.A.G.E.: Radical Attitudes Generating Education

food programs and resistance to the state with arms (as championed by the Black Panthers), but also as calls for community control of neighborhood public schools and a drive to establish schools that would operate independently of them. Black independent schools sprang up in different communities throughout the United States in the time period between the mid-to late 1960s and the 1970s. Some of the schools focused on traditional academic content (e.g. science, mathematics) but also included content that enabled children to be creative in the performing arts, visual arts, and martial arts.²²³ These schools also shared a focus and commitment to teaching children not only their ABCs, but about their African-heritage, culture, and opportunities for liberation as a people, Black people.

Russell Rickford explores the conditions and theoretical underpinnings that led to Black independent schools in his work, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*. Their mission endeavored to educate Black children not only about their culture and a heritage that began in Africa; they also taught them to appreciate their communities and self-determination. Rickford notes that these Black independent institutions, or “counterinstitutions,” drew from the tradition of freedom schools developed during the Civil Rights movement, and they emerged after the dissolution of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).²²⁴ Many of SNCC’s former members dispersed throughout different parts of the country and established schools that would serve as viable alternatives to public schools and other oppressive structures that dominated

²²³ Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 11.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 2, 10.

the lives of Black community members. As urban environments deteriorated, these independent schools offered spaces to not only discuss and learn about Black liberation, but spaces to actually start the process of liberation (e.g. decolonizing the mind, conceptualizing and organizing for an African nation as Black Americans). The groups of activist-intellectuals who contributed to this portion of the movement could be identified as “cultural and revolutionary nationalists,” Pan Africanists, and some Marxists; regardless of their ideological bend, many of them aimed to help their communities by changing the consciousness of those within them.²²⁵

The Black Arts Movement emerged alongside the rise of Black independent educational institutions. In fact, they drew upon each other, offering opportunities for Black artists of various kinds to teach young people skills and ways to promote and appreciate blackness. Margo Natalie Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins note that in addition to embracing and championing James Brown’s mantra, “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud,” the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement encouraged Black folks to destroy the dominant, white aesthetics upon which western art was established and defined. Artists hailed from a diversity of fields and backgrounds. And a hallmark of the movement was collaborations between poets, painters, photographers, dancers, musicians, and theorists, with a goal to love and celebrate Black ways of thinking, seeing, doing, and being.²²⁶ Additionally, one didn’t have to

²²⁵ Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*, 3.

²²⁶ Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford. “Introduction: Power to the People!: The Art of Black Power.” In *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, edited by Lisa Gail and Margo Natalie Crawford Collins, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 11.

be classically trained to be an artist and to produce work to share with the community. Ideology was not separated from aesthetics, and all of it was pro-Black; self-love, love of Black culture, and love for Black people boldly occupied the center of the movement. These are critical traditions from which Natur draws, and this heritage is what informs almost every area of his life and work.

Introducing Jabari Natur

Baltimore, a chocolate city with diverse roots, is an awe-inspiring backdrop to explore the life of Jabari Natur and the creation and work of Watoto from the Nile. Though published 23 years ago, McDougall's observation of Baltimore as a predominantly black city still holds today.²²⁷ As of the 2010 U.S. national census, Baltimore city claimed 620,961 residents (more than Washington, D.C. and Boston's total populations, but less than Detroit's), and 395,781 of those residents identified as African-American, representing 63.7% of the city's total population.²²⁸ Those identifying as white totaled 183,830, representing 29.6% of the city's population; all those identifying as a race other than white or African-American represented around 4.6% of the city's remaining population (combined).²²⁹ While predominantly African-American, Baltimore has a rich history of cultural contact (as noted earlier in this

²²⁷ Harold McDougall, "Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community." (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1.

²²⁸ United States Census 2010 (Interactive Population Search): <http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/> (accessed July 5, 2016).

²²⁹ United States Census 2010 (Interactive Population Search): <http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/> (accessed July 5, 2016).

chapter) spawned by the political landscape and geography of the mid-Atlantic that gives it a unique story to tell.²³⁰

In the aftermath of the death of Freddie Gray, Natur's story is one that is worthy of attention, even apart from his work with Watoto. Arguably, he represents an army, seemingly small but never silent. He is an heir apparent to the Black Arts Movement, and his life serves as a critical departure to examine the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement. Natur's life and work had to ask and address the Civil Rights Movement and how it has failed to speak to a new generation of African Americans like himself still suffering under the weight of structural racism, political ineffectiveness spawned in part by self-preservation on the part of politicians and civic leaders, and pain experienced at the hands of those in their own communities with the circulation of drugs and the violence that came along with its proliferation.

Contemporary Baltimore, though home to many struggles, is also a haven for Black people looking to live an Afrocentric lifestyle, dubbed neo soul, which evolved from the genre of music with the same name.²³¹ Sheri Parks, a public intellectual, Navasha Daya, an artist, and Jamyla Bennu, a small-business owner, spoke with Tom Hall, a local Baltimore NPR radio host, about neo soul in a recent radio broadcast. Their discussion reflects upon the neo soul movement generally and the movement in Baltimore specifically.²³² Currently, the neo soul movement encompasses not only

²³⁰ Its place as one of the last, if not the last, predominantly Black cities in America is one that needs to be explored.

²³¹ Tom Hall and Cianna B. Greaves. *Midday Culture Connection: Neo Soul, the Music and the Movement*. WYPR, April 3, 2018. Audio, 49:34. <http://www.wypr.org/post/midday-culture-connection-neo-soul-music-and-movement>.

²³² *Ibid.*

music, but everything from spirituality, self-care, and embracing one's natural hair, to an appreciation of natural foods and skin care. It also centers Black and African cultural work (visual art, music, food, clothing/fashion), education about people of the African diaspora, and a host of other affirming activities and efforts to build community. I have found it to include frequenting Black-owned businesses and themed events, especially those that cater to this cultural movement. Standouts of the burgeoning Baltimore neo soul culture are the annual Vegan SoulFest (entering its fifth season in 2018), vegan and vegetarian themed-restaurants Terra Café and The Land of Kush, and natural body and hair care boutique, Oyin Handmade.

So it is here that I consider Natur. He stands about 5'7," give or take a couple of inches. He's a shade or two lighter than caramel, plump, and he often sports a close haircut (but not too close), along with a trimmed mustache and goatee. While out, you're likely to see him wearing a long t-shirt or hoodie, baggy jeans, and sneakers, and he's been known to don a baseball cap, usually cocked to one side ever so slightly. He's also known to wear a dashiki now and then. And make no mistake, Natur is a Baltimore son/sun through and through, embodying the north, south, and east coast sensibilities that often converge in Baltimore. I also argue that Natur is a part of Baltimore's neo soul community. He's at home with the brothers of the Nation of Islam (NOI), as well as with the owners of Terra Café and the Land of Kush. However, Natur has partnered more with the old guard of Black radical social movements than those of the neo soul movement. There is a deference to elders in the movement, but that may stem from Natur's journey and how he evolved in reading the works of some of the people he reveres and taps for events.

Natur's Baltimore Story

Born in West Baltimore in 1975, Natur recounts that his father was a functional drug addict who was in and out of his home, which prompted Natur, his mother and two sisters to move to East Baltimore to live with his maternal grandmother a few times before settling there as a youth and adult. His father's struggles with alcohol and marijuana had a profound impact on Natur, and while his father would spend time with him on different weekends, his maternal uncle, who also lived in the same house as Natur, became a father figure to him inside the home: his uncle exposed him to music, played baseball with him, taught him about logic and how to fight, and he taught him, along with his mother, to have an appreciation for all Black women, regardless of their hue. Natur also attributes what he (now) cares about—his “heart”—to his mother, that being a love for other Black people, and respect for women. He is also quick to note that what made him different, and what helped him to accomplish more, was a good family structure. His mother, uncle, and grandmother provided guidance, stability, and support for him to learn and grown into the man he is. Unfortunately, not all of his friends made it, which also profoundly impacted Natur.²³³ However, his education, both inside and outside of the home helped to set the stage for the type of activist and leader he would become as a young man.

²³³ Natur recounted a story of a childhood friend, his best friend, who suffered and grieved his mother's death at the age of 9. His dad was in prison until he was in high school, and his cousin became involved in the drug game. Not long after (i.e. in middle school), this same friend became involved in the drug trade and later died as a result of it. Natur went on to speak about other peers in his neighborhood whose family support systems were not as strong, and how their lives ended in death and/or incarceration.

Natur called his traditional schooling, especially middle school, a rough experience, even referring to his middle school as a “baby prison.”²³⁴ Moreover, the schools he attended were tough places. Admittedly, he never liked school academically; Natur remembered that he liked school socially, but only did enough to pass on the academic side of things.²³⁵ Natur believes he survived by learning how to navigate his environment and circumvent some of the pitfalls of the violence that surrounded him through fostering the right relationships and friendships, and by essentially knowing the boundaries of the social and physical landscapes he traversed everyday:

That [middle school] was like the roughest place you ever wanna go you know what I’m sayin’, but I survived there. I didn’t get in one fight—I didn’t get in—you know what I mean—you know and I uhmm...just kinda know how to navigate you know what I’m sayin’ like a lil’ bit you know what I’m sayin’ like I was able tuh—you know get outta that stuff. And then, you know being like affiliated—[***] not-not gang affiliated per se, but like being like uhmm...you know what I’m sayin’ like havin’ some sort of protection. I-I didn’t have no brothers and stuff but I mean from the community and stuff like that. Well, I mean I kn—you know we knew some of the right people who was doin’ some of the stuff that was in the community so it was like—you know you had counter to a degree some protection. So, by the time I was in high school and I linked forces with like this—they call it the valley and—and you have down the hill and you got up the hill you know what I’m sayin.’ So then we had—you know mean [know what I mean] the down the hill was supposed to be the-the real hard spots you know what I’m sayin.’²³⁶

Navigating these landscapes could be incredibly challenging and tricky, and Natur and his friends had to occupy a space where they were “not to be messed with” because of those they knew who could “hold them down” and help defend them in the streets. However, they did not endeavor to look for trouble, but would defend

²³⁴ Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, April 27, 2015, Baltimore, MD.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015. *Identifying information omitted.*

themselves if they needed to. It was a delicate dance, but one that arguably enabled Natur to intimately understand the many challenges of his community and the beauty still housed within it. It also served as part of the impetus and the backdrop for a cultural and educational awakening that Natur experienced later on in his young adulthood.

Music had an important place in Natur's home growing up, and he developed a love for it as a child through the exposure his uncle primarily gave him. As a youth, he became a regular at different clubs around Baltimore, including Hammerjacks and Ozone, both establishments that played Baltimore club music among other genres like Hip Hop and rhythm and blues (R&B).²³⁷ His forays at the club provided numerous opportunities to get entangled with the brawling and out-and-out fights that escalated ending in severe injuries, death, and/or arrests, but Natur and his friends remained committed to staying out of trouble and coming home alive each night. This required self-control within the confines of tight, hot, steamy clubs, where the likelihood of someone accidentally (or intentionally) stepping on your new kicks seemed to go up the longer you stuck around. Or you could fall prey to the territorial behavior that would ramp up based on impressing a girl or woman of interest, again potentially ending in altercations that could result in injuries, death, and/or arrests.

²³⁷ Baltimore club is a musical genre similar to house, but with more fierce bass rhythms and a variety of other musical influences from R&B to Hip Hop, among others. Please see Casey Embert's 2016 *Baltimore City Paper* article "We Made All This Shit! The History of Unruly Records, Which Just Celebrated 20 Years, Tells the History of Baltimore Club Music." Al Shipley also writes extensively about Baltimore's club music scene, especially through his blog, <http://governmentnames.blogspot.com/>.

Natur became a deejay around the 8th grade and continued with playing baseball through high school. He made the varsity baseball team as a 12th grader, and also found that barbering and deejaying gave him (viable life) options. During this time, Natur was presented with the opportunity to get a car, which came with the financial responsibility of a car note, but it was one he welcomed. At this point, he sacrificed playing baseball to get turntables and to pay for his car. Natur also notes one run-in with drugs while he was in high school, and he attributes his fleeting interest in them to an effort to be more appealing and desirable to girls. He recounts that one drug-related job/task earned him \$600, and with a car note as a 12th grader, he saw that the drug game could pay the bills. But a fateful car ride to church one morning with his mother and grandmother stirred his conscience (and perhaps his consciousness). His mother's simple, but compelling comment, "I hope you never sell drugs 'cause it would really, really break my heart" touched and resonated with Natur at a critical time.²³⁸ "There's was always someone to stop me."²³⁹ People he respected said the right things at the right time to encourage him to move past the low-hanging fruit proffered by peddling drugs. Nature had to move on from the game and find another way, and that other way initially came through music.

Around his senior year of high school, Natur took the military pre-test, failed it, and decided not to take it again. He also considered attending DeVry University (a for-profit institution for higher education), but he "didn't want to do the 'school thing'."²⁴⁰ His then girlfriend considered joining the military as well, but they did not

²³⁸ Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, April 27, 2015, Baltimore, MD

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

want to leave each other since Natur decided not to pursue joining the military after he failed the pre-test. Subsequently, the Baltimore City Police Department (BPD) also came recruiting, and he contemplated joining their cadet program, which was a training program aspiring police officers entered before going to the academy. However, BPD discontinued the program right in the middle of Natur's run. After the cadet program's cancellation, Natur went through what he termed a "total transformation period."²⁴¹

With the BPD cadet program cancelled, Natur was in limbo. During this time, he started looking after his sisters' children (two girls and a boy) and took on the role of "Mr. Mom" right out of high school while waiting for the cadet program to resume.²⁴² Arguably, this may have also laid the groundwork for what he would do looking after his own children and the children of others in the future. He would take his nieces and nephew to and from school, and developed a routine while the children were out of the house. His family had a video collection, and Natur would watch different movies every day. However, there was one movie he did not want to watch because it was too long: Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*.²⁴³ Time passed, and he went through all the movies in his family's collection; there was nothing else new to watch...apart from the movie he had been avoiding. So, Natur watched *Malcolm X*, and he noted that "he wanted to be like *him*," that being Malcolm X.²⁴⁴ He called his counselors from a previous school "who were into it," "it" being Black empowerment.

²⁴¹ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ This film is the Spike Lee and Denzel Washington version from 1992.

²⁴⁴ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015.

Around this time, his girlfriend required that he go to the library with her, especially since she had enrolled in college and wanted him to be intellectually engaged with something, anything. His girlfriend and another friend of his were going through what Natur called a spiritual voyage: she was going to church and his friend was involved in his Kingdom Hall as a Jehovah’s Witness.²⁴⁵ Admittedly, Natur did not know a lot about the Bible and was not studying it. His brother-in-law, whom he labeled a “hardcore Christian,” encouraged him to explore religious materials and content related to his Christian walk. His brother-in-law also mentioned and kept talking about Dr. Yosef Ben-Jochannan, also known affectionately as Dr. Ben. Natur later asked, “Who’s Dr. Ben?”; he was intrigued.²⁴⁶

While at the library with his girlfriend one day, Natur picked up a book by Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam during Malcolm X’s time. He noted that he did not understand everything he read, even calling himself a “function illiterate,” but understood some.²⁴⁷ Vocabulary and terms like “politics” and “economics” were foreign to Natur, and he attributed his ignorance of these terms to his poor high school education: “A lot of us didn’t know that stuff coming out of [high school].²⁴⁸ We wasn’t a college—SAT [type of preparatory school].”²⁴⁹ However, Natur was not deterred. He later went to a store at Mondawmin mall and bought a (college-level) book by Dr. Ben because he was so captivated.²⁵⁰ Natur and

²⁴⁵ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. *Identifying information omitted.*

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

his family had just bought a computer with an encyclopedia he would use to search and explore terms and concepts that were unfamiliar to him. He bought notebooks and would go through Dr. Ben’s book identifying and highlighting words he did not know.²⁵¹ He reveled in learning everything, from terms to geography to the histories of ancient African civilizations—B.C., A.D., Africa, Egypt. Even asking, ‘Where’s Egypt at?’²⁵² Natur was so thirsty for this newfound knowledge about African culture that he would stay up until three, four, or five o’clock in the morning reading and exploring concepts and themes introduced in Dr. Ben’s book. Natur described it as “mind changing,” and with that one book, he felt empowered enough to start debating his girlfriend and Jehovah’s Witness friend about Black people and culture.²⁵³ And he did not stop there. Natur soon waxed poetic with other men he knew in the neighborhood about what he was learning from Dr. Ben: [I started] “comin’ ‘round the boys in the neighborhood and talking about black people. [They would say], ‘here come Malcolm.’ [I was] on fire.” Yet, there was still an unresolved internal conflict Natur had to address.

While Natur was spreading the gospel of the origin of black civilization, he encountered some pushback from those he ministered to as it related to his own behavior and how contradictory it was to the consciousness he spoke so passionately about to others on the block: “Man, you always talkin’ all that black stuff, but you doin’ some of the same stuff we be doin.”²⁵⁴ Natur had to concede that they were

²⁵¹ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

right, and made the decision to “separate himself” and to change his behavior.²⁵⁵ He started frequenting the Baltimore Penn North neighborhood store “Everyone’s Place African Cultural Center” where he bought audio tapes and lectures from Malcolm X.²⁵⁶ “Everyone’s Place” as it is commonly known, was and is a local, Black-owned bookstore that sells things related to African history, culture, philosophy, politics, etc. in addition to the African diasporic experience. It was around that time that one of his sister’s former prom dates told him about a study group that discussed content he was now interested in and wanted to pursue further. His connect (i.e. contact person) was around 23 and Natur was 19, but most of the people in the study group were in their 30s. Natur lamented the fact there were no young people (that being people close to his age) in the group. So his friend encouraged him to start his own group, a group comprised of people around his age. But Natur noted that he did not have any money, to which his friend replied, “you don’t need any money.”²⁵⁷ Serendipity continued, and Natur was offered a job at “Everyone’s Place,” and he used that as an opportunity to advertise his new group to customers. He also stayed on top of the elections, and the BPD started calling to inform him that they reinstated the cadet program. Natur could not stomach the idea of being a police officer at this point in time: “I’m like uehhhhnnnn. They were calling me for like two months—lookin’ for me. I couldn’t do it anymore. I was like I don’t wanna be a police officer.”²⁵⁸ And there was more

²⁵⁵ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. “Everyone’s Place” is only blocks away from the epicenter of Baltimore rebellion that erupted after the death of Freddie Gray, a young black man who died from a spinal cord injury he incurred while in Baltimore Police custody.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015.

Natur was into, more things were stirring on the home front and on a national scale that furthered his “awakening.”

A few months after starting at Everyone’s Place, Natur was encouraged by a co-worker to change his name. The thought never occurred to him—everything about his shift to African-centered thinking, being, and doing was so new. His co-worker took him to a book of names and helped him to pick one out. She saw the name Jabari and said, “It means brave. You’re brave.”²⁵⁹ Jabari was hesitant but said, okay. He came up with the last name Natur by combining Nat Turners two names. Together, Natur’s two names mean one who bravely searches truth with the spirit of Nat Turner.

Natur also met his ex-wife around this time while selling books (mostly fiction, with some conscious/Afrocentric and inspirational titles mixed in) to customers at hair salons. His ex-wife’s best friend, one of the shop owners on his route, mentioned to him that her friend should attend because of her interest and passion for Black people. His ex-wife signed up for the orientation for Natur’s study group, but did not attend. However, she maintained an interest in and passion for learning about Black people. Natur was also in an on-again-off-again relationship with the same girlfriend/fiancée who encouraged him to learn and educate himself. He linked up with his ex-wife at a time he and his ex-fiancée were not in a relationship and they started a family together.

The Million Man March occurred around the time Natur was starting his group and hearing back from BPD. He came to know a man involved in the Nation of

²⁵⁹ Jabari means brave in Swahili.

Islam (NOI) and they started a group called “Da Real.”²⁶⁰ The group served to bring young, Black people together. Natur and this new assemblage determined that they needed more structure, so they renamed the whole group “Solvivaz Nation” and developed a seven-point plan that touched on the following areas: economics, creative offspring (e.g. Watoto from the Nile), uniforms, Reality Speaks (lectures), unity (e.g. programs for youth and elders).²⁶¹ The group ended up breaking up, but they came back together about a year later, and decided to add something to Solvivaz: “a culture within it.”²⁶² After reuniting, they took of the mantle of outreach. They started protesting out in the middle of the street with bullhorns; they implemented prison ministries; and they started this in the late 90s into the 2000s, through the early 2000s.²⁶³

On August 17, 2000, Marcus Garvey’s birthday, Natur opened Conscious Heads barbershop. Barbering at the shop became his bread and butter for years afterward, especially during lean times with Watoto and the kale chip business he started later. Sometime after the shop opened, Natur and his Solvivaz peers were hanging out at the shop considering the Hip Hop music that was popular at the time. They believed they could offer their community (and the world) a Hip Hop album to spread their message of Black unity.²⁶⁴ Coming off of their own “Unify or Die” campaign, one that capitalized on the “vote or die” message championed by public figures like Sean “Puffy/P. Diddy/Diddy” Combs, Natur and other members of

²⁶⁰ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, May 11, 2015, Baltimore, MD.

Solvivaz sought to encourage their brothers and sisters to embrace each other and not the political system. Hip Hop was one medium and platform they used to spread their message of unity, and they named this arm of their movement Conscious Heads. Their first and only album was titled, “Unify or Die.” However, Conscious Heads did not survive. Arguably, Conscious Heads broke up for some of the same reasons that break up many types of groups, regardless of their mission: namely, some members were more devoted and more serious about the group than others. Natur laments what he recalls as an unwillingness of his peers to be professional (e.g. practicing) and a lack of desire to put in the work in order to “go to the next level.”²⁶⁵ He moved on from Conscious Heads as the group fell apart, and Natur turned his attention to other young people in Solvivaz who he could organize around promoting an African/Afrikan-centered message through Hip Hop. This group, titled Sunz of N.A.T, was the second Hip Hop group to emerge from the ranks of Solvivaz.

Sunz of N.A.T was comprised of Solvivaz-affiliated youth in their teens. They ranged in age from 16 to 17, the group totaled seven in number, and it had six young men and one young woman. Natur likened them to Dead Prez in their energy and passion for promoting an Afrikan-centered mindset: “They were like Dead Prez, you know what I’m sayin’, and we let ‘em be and they parents let ‘em be. They let ‘em curse and everything, and you know what I’m sayin.’ But they had—we produced a helluva project...”²⁶⁶ And to hear Natur wax poetically about the group, how strong it was, is inspiring, but it, too, fell away as members moved on in life—to college and

²⁶⁵ Natur, interview May 11, 2015.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

and/or other things. Natur specifically noted how good the sole young woman in the group was; she was also the one who went off to college by the time their album was done. At the end of it all, Sunz of N.A.T sold about 30 copies of its first and only album, “Living & Dying In A Warzone Called Amerikkka Volume 1. In the end, Natur was left holding the bag, and it was one filled with unsold albums.

Still, the Sunz of N.A.T. project cost Natur emotionally as well as financially. He related that he felt like a lot of the parents of the young people in the group let their children quit.²⁶⁷ And he continued with a somber recollection of how he put his own money into both the Sunz of N.A.T project and Conscious Heads’s “Unify or Die” album with an end result of both groups falling apart. Natur, however, did not give up hope in terms of spreading the Solvivaz message through Hip Hop; he just stopped hanging his hopes on those outside of his own core group and he switched his ministry to that of his family, comprised of three young girls and a wife. Amid his activities and community work, Natur got married in 2005, with his first and second daughters born a few years before that. His last daughter came long in 2006.

Watoto from the Nile emerged from Natur’s time with his three young girls after Sunz of N.A.T. dissolved. He played a video (on his phone) for me during one of our interviews. In it, he asked his children, “What’s the name of y’all group?”²⁶⁸ The girls, who sounded like they were older than toddlers but younger than tweens, joyfully responded, “Watoto of the Nile!”²⁶⁹ Natur proudly continued on noting that the girls named the group, not him. And their inspiration most likely came from their

²⁶⁷ Natur, interview May 11, 2015.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid; Natur, interview, April 27, 2015.

Afrikan-centered education as young children. Natur recalled that the educators at his daughters' Afrikan-centered school called the children Watoto, a Swahili word that means children. He also made it clear that he did not know where his children got the idea to add "from the Nile" to the name of their group or why they chose to adopt it as their moniker. Even so, it all occurred around a time of great upheaval for both his family and Solvivaz. Natur articulated how Solvivaz succumbed to infighting and that things were "crazy," with departures by group members. He and his then wife also proceeded with plans to separate around this time. In the midst of all the aforesaid turmoil, Natur bonded with his children through songs he created and they sang about the RBG: the red, black, and green flag representative of a Pan-Africanist agenda and ideology.

The bonding of which Natur speaks, occurred at a time when he felt intense pressure and isolation. His story about the conception of the Watoto song "I Won't Quit" is characteristic of his approach to struggle in several areas of his life. He recounted how he got the idea for some of the lyrics for the song from the movie "Bloodsport," featuring Jean-Claude Van Damme.²⁷⁰ Natur described how at one point in the film Frank Dux's (Van Damme) opponent plays dirty and throws salt in Dux's eyes to prevent him from winning his martial arts match. However, Dux, according to Natur, was able to win because he tapped into "the force," an ability for him to sense things around him without the use of his natural eyes.²⁷¹ Natur likened Dux's struggle with his own in some ways: a pending separation which led to

²⁷⁰ Natur, interview, May 11, 2015. Natur and I spoke and initially referenced Vin Diesel for the movie, in error.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

divorce; the implosion of an activist group in which he invested so much; and the triumph of pouring into a group of his own making (Watoto, in Natur's case).

And what had happened was he was winnin' at the end uhmm the guy had took some salt and threw it in his eyes so he couldn't see, so he had to feel the force like. He couldn't see him 'cause he threw salt in his eyes to make him lose, so that's why I said you could throw salt in my eyes... You know, it was just a period you know what I'm sayin,' it's like yeah, I ain't gon' stop, you know what I'm sayin.' I lost a lot of people around me... It was like a crazy time period, and me and the girls really bonded though during that time... So we recorded that song, worked on it for a little while—we went and recorded it you know. That's why to this day it's like one of my favorites...²⁷²

Natur was able to connect his struggle with the bonding he felt with his children and a greater mission to speak to the challenges and needs of his community, despite increasing isolation. That connection is critical as we continue to consider the challenges of activism for Natur.

Time, money, and energy were all things that Natur invested in for projects with Solvivaz, Conscious Heads, and Sunz of N.A.T. But, at the end of the day, he was left with debt and the option to hold on to a mission and dream that others chose to forsake. This profoundly hurt Natur, and it evoked feelings of abandonment. Even so, he did not step away from his mission to inform and empower. In fact, he refocused his ministry to the front at home with his daughters: "I thought maybe I should just take my time and put my time into my daughters. Can't nobody take them away from me, you know what I'm sayin', you know what I mean. Like I could take my time and we could do this; yeah that's what I'm gonna do."²⁷³ The fact that he had children he could pour into, what some would call a captive audience, is an important

²⁷² Natur, interview May 11, 2015.

²⁷³ Ibid.

thing. Natur saw an opportunity to guide and shepherd his children in understanding their history and worth, first at home, and then out to proselytize to their community and the world at large. His first ministry, though, was to educate his children and to build upon the Afrikan-centered foundation he and his wife laid for them. In that vein, his parenting was part and parcel of his efforts in the greater struggle for Black people to embrace themselves and all their potential. Natur chose to pick up the pieces by continuing to “father” his daughters. And in this way, he also continued to choose parenting as a tool in his activist toolbox.

Natur guided his daughters as their talents continued to develop. He would write songs and record them, and they would give him suggestions for beats to use. That continued for several years where Jabari would write content and look for beats, and he would work with the girls to record the music. The girls would also give Natur beats and ask him to write lyrics for them. The songs would focus on African-centered themes of unity and self-affirmation, as well as self-determination and perseverance. This can be seen in two of their earliest songs, “RBG Diva” and “I Won’t Quit.” His eldest daughter, a child with a strong singing voice, could do double duty. Natur would learn that his middle daughter was a burgeoning writer as well as a rapper. In time, a couple of other girls joined the group, one with a strong singing voice and rapping capabilities, and the other who primarily rapped in Watoto songs. Natur would continue to build on their recordings, as he also pounded the pavement to get the word out about the group.

Watoto performed and continues to perform at Reality Speaks functions (e.g. lectures), as well as themed events outside of Reality Speaks venues. Such venues

include being featured on the Baltimore stops of the Speak Life Tour in 2015 and 2016, performing at Vegan SoulFest in 2015, and the invitation to perform at events in Buffalo, New York, Georgia, and California. Watoto was also able to put on a few of its own concerts to showcase their songs and the talents of other members within their community. Natur is careful to be mindful of the audiences who come to their performances. People bring their small children to Watoto performances, and that factors into their decision to refrain from using profanity and foul language, even when rapping and singing about being referred to as bitches, whores, and other derogatory names/terms. He and the girls of Watoto are intimately aware of how much image and representation factor to in how they are perceived and received.

Images of Joe Jackson and the Jackson 5 (or any other infamous stage parents) could easily come to mind when considering the pressures, challenges, and dynamics involved in creating and managing a youth music group, not even considering its mission and message. And to be clear, Watoto is not a pop group who raps and sings about hair, clothes, sex, boys, etc. They rap and sing about the health benefits of eating kale, respecting the legacy of Malcolm X and mothers of the Black struggle, knowing Black history and investing in Black communities economically, and respecting Black women and girls like them because they are queens (as they assert all Black girls and women are, regardless of whether or not they recognize it). These are not messages touted in the mainstream, especially not from people who look and sound like the girls of Watoto. And Natur is not a ringleader; he is a father, co-parent, mentor, advisor, provider, and a manager. In light of these titles, we have to contemplate and reflect upon the added strain of Natur continuing with the mantle of

social activism and its tendency not to provide financially. The impact of this reality should not be overlooked or underestimated. A recurring theme in Natur's narrative is the overwhelming and ongoing challenge of putting social activism to work; it simply does not pay well though it is worth the price for people like Natur and the girls of Watoto. Economic losses take their toll, but they are almost deemed as investments or contributions of sorts to the cause(s) of and for unity, enlightenment, and freedom for Black people.

At the heart of it all, Watoto is a family, bound by "immediate" blood, the blood of brothers and sisters who devote their time and energy to supporting Watoto and its mission in word and deed, and the blood of ancestors long gone. Natur and the girls of Watoto share a common mission; they write, perform, and break bread together; some of the girls attend the same high school; and they share some of the same trials and tribulations. The three original members of Watoto are "blood" sisters, and as Natur confirmed, are products of divorce. The element of separation and divorce is also an important player here, both in the struggle to keep Watoto focused on its mission, but also to supporting and guiding its original members.

From Natur's perspective, parenting has been challenging because of the physical (and emotional/psychological) distance that accompanies co-parenting between two separate households, but also the ideological rift that may have widened between him and his ex-wife since they separated. He mentioned that his ex-wife knew about the movement and his commitment to being involved in the struggle for Black self-determination in different arenas. However, Natur acknowledges that "she was involved, but not involved;" he also admits that maybe she participated to

appease him while they were together and that her work ethic was different from his.²⁷⁴ He later paints a picture not of perfection on his part, but of a desire to include the girls' mother in supporting the group, but to no avail. Natur was noticeably frustrated with what he described as his ex-wife's refusal to participate in the community of Watoto. He explains that he asked her to use her gifts for the benefit of group in making clothes for their performances or creating a whole clothing line that the girls could just wear to wear. And he recounts that he also encouraged her to help with booking their engagements, but she was reluctant to do so, in part, according to Natur, because she did not want to be under his control.²⁷⁵

Natur goes on to assert that his daughters grappled with the new normal that emerged after the separation and then divorce, and that his oldest daughter eventually stepped away from the group because his ex-wife's anger (i.e. negative energy) was transferred to her: "You can see they was strugglin', they was strugglin' you know what I'm sayin'...So uhm eventually, with my oldest daughter uhm you know well she always had trust and love—you can see in the back of the videos the girls always loved being around me, you know what I'm sayin', you know what I mean. We had a good time. But eventually, uhh my ex-wife's anger was almost transferred to her, you know what I'm sayin.'"²⁷⁶ Natur definitely attributes his girls' struggles with Watoto to the negative energy that he believes is directed towards the group by his ex-wife. He also attributes his eldest daughter's decision to step away from Watoto to his ex-

²⁷⁴ Natur, interview, May 11, 2015.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

wife's influence and her knack for speaking negatively about him and Watoto while with their children.

I cannot verify Natur's accounts of his ex-wife's interactions with their children as it relates to Watoto and participating in the group. I do not recall her ever being introduced as a supporter of the group at the performances I attended. Specifically, neither Natur nor his group's wrangler ever pointed her out as being in attendance for a performance. To be fair, this does not mean she never attended a performance after the separation and divorce. It also does not mean she did not support the girls as members of the group. However, her absence at events and showcases (at least the ones I attended) was palpable. This may be attributed to the deteriorating relationship between Natur and his ex-wife. However, I'm spurred to ask what caused the relationship to deteriorate? How did Natur's devotion to the movement factor into his interactions with his ex-wife and how does it continue to influence his children? I cannot answer all of these questions based on the data I secured, but they are worthy of future exploration. It is also important to ponder the potential impact on the girls of not having one of their parents around to support their involvement in something they have participated in for years, voluntarily or involuntarily. Undoubtedly, Watoto's members had other staunch supporters, namely a devoted othermother whose younger daughter eventually became a member of the group and whose older daughter served as a mentor and "roadie." At one time, the older daughter also provided critical support to the group during many of their performances and assisted Natur with logistics during everyday operations.

The role of gender and patriarchy should not be overlooked. Patriarchy and deference to male leadership is a hallmark of the Nation of Islam, among other organizations dedicated to Black activism, radical or otherwise. The control Natur referenced in his discussion of his ex-wife's reluctance to do more in support of Watoto may be an outgrowth of her discomfort with a lack of partnership and equity in how Watoto was shepherded and cultivated. Admittedly, one of the advantages of Natur's role as a father and manager of Watoto is that he did and continues to occupy a certain position of power: he called many of the shots in the beginning just given his role as a parent. And while he incorporated the girls' ideas and attended to their gifts, he was a primary decision maker. That power cannot and should not be underestimated. It isn't unreasonable to contemplate how power dynamics and ideology may have impacted Natur's relationship with his ex-wife, especially over differences in childrearing based on an ideology that privileges male leadership even while praising Black women as leaders within the home and other parts of the community. Black women have served in Black social movements, and continue to do so, regardless of who is at the helm. However, the strain on relationships, along with the relegation to the backseat of ongoing supporting roles in organizations and the home can be taxing.

Additionally, Natur mentioned times when his daughters were swayed by dominant narratives about beauty and behavior, which he consistently tried and tries to work against. For example, he prefers they wear their natural hair out or in natural styles (e.g. braids, twists) as opposed to weaves comprised of straightened hair styles that resemble those worn by white Americans. However, Natur picks his battles given

that two of his daughters are teenagers and one is a pre-teen. I also relayed to him that wearing hairstyles donned by other girls and figures in popular culture is part of being young, growing up, and dealing with peer pressure. This is an example of Natur's concern with African-centered images and the round rejection of white beauty ideals. It is not an unworthy concern or desire, especially given the damage that white supremacy has visited upon the self-image of Black people here and abroad. However, this preoccupation can also be seen as a means to control, not only the message, but his children. The girls' mother allows them to explore and try new hairstyles, even weaves. Doing so may give the girls a needed outlet to express different portions of their identity and creativity.

Natur wrote songs for the girls of Watoto until they could write them for themselves, but from the beginning, the girls would bring Natur beats for him to use and would ask him to write songs for those specific beats.²⁷⁷ The girls of Watoto were invested in the creative process from the beginning, even with determining the name of their own group. They may not have wanted to practice all of the time, and they were sensitive to some of the same pressures that other girls their age often encountered: bullying, the importance of appearance (hair, clothes, etc.), and navigating different environments (social, physical, etc.).

Around 2010, Natur ran into some hiccups and had to address his barber shop, Conscious Heads, along with Watoto, the Hip Hop group comprised of his three daughters at the time. He was starting to build them up, and was juggling work and

²⁷⁷ Natur, interview, May 11, 2015.

family life.²⁷⁸ Natur reflected on how involvement with his causes had set him back financially in the past. He noted, “protesting doesn’t pay bills. [I’m] not like a minister where you can go to a protest and still get a check.”²⁷⁹ And Natur’s reflection continued looking back not just on financial struggles, but the struggle itself, the long-term commitment it required, and how it would endure despite any other challenges he encountered in life:

Twenties was good, teens was good, thirties was definitely challenging. Got a divorce. Uncle and grandmother died. Praying for forties. Thirties was a learning experience. Feel like Job at times in the thirties. [I] have respect from people because I never stopped. I was consistent. Steady grinding even in going through stuff in my thirties. [I would] come back from an event with two or three people with more the next time. Consistency. Sometimes [I] don’t feel like getting out of bed. But an hour later I’ll be like, ‘get out of bed, I’ve got work to do.’ Trying to teach Watoto the same temperament and what I grew up with.²⁸⁰

The importance of struggle is something he has endeavored to pass along to his children and the other young women of Watoto from the Nile. Natur learned as Watoto’s members grew that parenting and mentoring were also challenging given the different pressures these girls and young women had to face and will continue to face throughout their schooling and formative years. They must confront the same types of peer pressures as other girls and young women their age, but they have the added weight of activism that can compound any feelings of difference and standing out among young people in their community.

Natur’s journey is a compelling one filled with the trials of growing up in what may have felt like a social and economic mine field, but it is one that still led

²⁷⁸ Natur, interview, May 11, 2015.

²⁷⁹ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

him to a cultural awakening that fueled his future passions and endeavors. Even so, helping to stoke and maintain that passion with Watoto is not an easy task, and it is one compounded by the challenges of co-parenting as a divorcee and dealing with the realities and pressures of adolescent lives with urban Baltimore as the backdrop.

Natur lamented the fact that his oldest daughter stepped away from Watoto and started walking down a path that looked to be destructive. He reported that she failed classes, invested her energy in modifying her image by wearing weaves and taking selfies, and fought other girls at school. It clearly pained and concerned Natur since he had worked so hard not to fight growing up, and prided himself on the fact that he did not engage in one fight in high school.²⁸¹ How much had his daughter's journey diverged from that of his own? How could he help set the path straight when he saw the message he delivered as different from that his ex-wife delivered to his daughter?

Natur's message and vision is one steeped in the value of work, knowledge of self and one's people (especially Black people), self-love, and love for other Black people. Given that, teaching and guiding Watoto is his primary ministry and possibly his most formidable challenge, even beyond the persistent financial difficulties and the grind of being an entrepreneur and leader. So much more is stake with Watoto in terms of the personal growth of the members, and the subsequent, residual impact they can have on a city and maybe even a generation. Natur sees this potential and does not take it for granted.

Work your way up. You gotta work your way. You gotta work. This is the mission...this is the work. [I] introduced it to my children. I'm a real revolutionary. It's a ministry. Not just being successful. [It's about] gettin' knowledge and information out there. Offering alternatives. [We're a] proud

²⁸¹ Natur, interview, April 27, 2015.

and mighty people. Comin' from the woman. Those girls. [They] bring life and love back to music. It's a ministry. Neo and the Matrix. I'm Morpheus and y'all [Watoto] are Neo. You're the one. They do stuff, and it's like wow. It's happening, it's happenin.' Fightin' against the machine. The propaganda machine. [These] girls think it's cute to be bitchy and mean. Bad girl club. It's a ministry; it's a gospel.²⁸²

Natur is a black, single father helping to raise three girls (in addition to otherfathering at least two to three other girls in Watoto) in one of the most dynamic yet troubled cities in America. Baltimore itself may be the physical representation of the love and frustration Natur simultaneously feels in bringing others to embrace a greater consciousness of self and self-love, including his own brood. In listening to Natur, you don't just hear him raging against the current state of affairs with BPD, and the terrors of life in Baltimore, including the prevalence of drugs, unemployment, and the persistently high homicide rate. He is intimately aware of the presence of the homes that lead up to his own block that are but burned shells of what they once were. Now, they are filled with the remnants of drug deals, temporary shelters, and murders rather than families eating around dinner tables, kids doing homework, and folks kicking back to watch TV or a movie after a long day. But Natur chooses to embrace not only hope, but the labor that must accompany it to move his children and his people forward in Baltimore and other cities like it.

The Baltimore uprising of 2015 shocked Natur; he was genuinely surprised by it. Yet, it was clear that he was proud of young people waking up. He was hopeful that this awakening of sorts would lead to opportunities to unify Black people, especially around efforts to abandon and reject the self-destructive behaviors that

²⁸² Natur, interview, April 27, 2015.

plagued so many communities in Baltimore (e.g. drug addiction, drug and gang-related homicides, and a profound and persistent lack of hope). A little over a year later after the uprising, the death of Lor Scoota (Tyriecce Watson) must have shaken Natur again. Scoota, a talented up-and-coming, Baltimore born and bred, Hip Hop artist, left a life in the streets to pursue his craft in earnest. However, his old life was not content to completely allow him to move on. On June 25, 2016, Scoota was shot in his car about a mile away from a peace event at Morgan State University he hosted earlier that evening. Chino Braxton, a local motorbike rider in the city, spoke about how he was not rattled after he suffered and endured his own attempted murder and lived, but he was after the death of his friend, Scoota.²⁸³ Braxton went on to say that he did not start to lose hope until after Scoota died.²⁸⁴ Where could he run? Where could he go to escape the life he so desperately wanted to leave behind? Natur and Watoto are contending with the reality that leaving behind the old may not result in embracing the new, at least not for long. For some Baltimore youth, leaving the old may be the last thing they do in life before they are made to embrace death far too soon. This is life in Baltimore city right now: life and death in cycles of 20 and 25, or less, and a persistent drive for people like Natur and the youth of Watoto to champion a different and better way to live—a way that is not always easy, but a path that enables people to speak and choose life even in the face (of persistent threats) of death.

²⁸³ Justin Fenton, “Rapper’s Murder Leaves Peers with Bleak Outlook on Baltimore,” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 28, 2016, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-chino-scoota-death-20160628-story.html>.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4: Affect in Effect

This chapter will focus on Natur and Watoto from the Nile as I consider affective labor's relationship to activism and the mobilization of Black love. It will also explore the costs of activism for people like Natur. Yet, before I discuss Black love and the costs of activism, as well as affective labor, I must define affective labor itself. Firstly, what is it and how has it been defined? Also, how does it apply to Natur in his and Watoto's particular cases?

Affective Labor and Affective Indigestion

Affective labor can be defined as work with an exchange value outside normalized monetary exchange value. Shiloh Whitney offers a useful analysis of affective labor in the context of race, and contends that it “is a by-productive labor, functioning according to a logic of amplification and transmission than one of use and exchange.”²⁸⁵ Additionally, as Michael Hardt notes, the “focus on the production of affects in our labor and our social practices has often served as a useful ground for anti-capitalist projects, in the context of discourses, for instance, on desire or on use-value.”²⁸⁶ He argues that these modes of analysis are the processes behind our laboring practices which “produce collective subjectivities, produce sociality, and ultimately produce society itself.”²⁸⁷ Hardt asserts that affective labor is one aspect of what he calls “immaterial labor,” which he argues is the dominant form of labor in

²⁸⁵ Shiloh Whitney, “Affective Indigestion: Lorde, Fanon, and Gutierrez-Rodriguez on Race and Affective Labor,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (2016): 290.

²⁸⁶ Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *Boundary* 26, no. 2 (1999): 89.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

global capitalism.²⁸⁸ In his view, affective labor, or its role, is one of the strongest components of postmodern capitalism, and it has great “potential for subversion and autonomous constitution,” and it ultimately houses potential for liberation.²⁸⁹

I want to further explore Hardt’s consideration of affective labor as immaterial labor, especially in a postmodern/late capitalist context because it impacts the conversation about Natur. He asserts that “information, communication, knowledge, and affect come to play a foundational role in the production process.”²⁹⁰ Drawing on Robert Reich, Hardt highlights what Reich describes as symbolic-analytical services, which embody tasks that include ““problem-solving, problem-identifying, and strategic brokering activities.””²⁹¹ I posit this analysis can be applied to reflections on the work of Natur (and Watoto), in that much of what they do involves building on the identifications of problems, identifying more problems and issues they can address, solving those problems on a community level, and working strategically with other (locally-embedded) stakeholders to affect change. Natur is among the not-so-silent army using activism including parenting, mentorship, and entrepreneurship to address some of the most pressing issues of this moment in his community. Hardt is also helpful here in contemplating affective labor (under the umbrella of immaterial labor) as human contact and interaction. Drawing from reflections on the work of

²⁸⁸ Hardt, *Affective Labor*, 90.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 93.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 95 as quoted from Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 177. Reich also argues they are all important for “competition in the new global economy.”

health services, the entertainment industry, and various culture industries that focus “on the creation and manipulation of affect.”²⁹²

In referencing and expanding upon Michel Foucault’s conception of biopower, which Foucault argues is a production of affective labor (e.g. social networks, community), Hardt makes the association between the creation of life and the production of affects, potentially in service of transformational change based on the collective goals of a given group: “Biopower is the power of the creation of life” and “what is created in the networks of affective labor is a form-of-life.”²⁹³ However, Hardt continues in this vein with a discussion of biopolitical production. His exploration of this concept ultimately leads to a conclusion that I argue many people (like Natur) agitating for social justice and change already know: politics matter.

Biopolitical production here consists primarily in the labor involved in the creation of life—not the activities of procreation but the creation of life precisely in the production and reproduction of affects... Labor works directly on the affects; it produces society it produces life. Affective labor, in this sense, is ontological—it reveals living labor constituting a form of life and thus demonstrate again the potential of biopolitical production.²⁹⁴

The notion of affective labor as an ontological phenomenon is important here. Ontology, or the study and understanding of ways of being, through the lens of affective labor would cast Natur, Watoto, and their (affective) labors of love as an intrinsic part of who they are, or *who they be* (a Black English/colloquial term that means who they are). I can make the argument that this is also true if considering their epistemological approach to it all, or stated otherwise, their ways of knowing

²⁹² Hardt, *Affective Labor*, 95.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

and experiencing the world. Affective labor as love in its many forms and deployments (e.g. of self, community, a people) is both an epistemological and ontological undertaking; it is a way of knowing *and* being for Natur.

For example, the immense effort that Natur puts into helping his girls to grow, including promoting their holistic development (educational, psychological, emotional, social, physical etc.), is more than pep talks and speeches: it's the daily grind he models for them in addition to his countenance and commitment to the struggle for freedom for him, his girls, his community, and all Black people. It's the way he is able to marshal all the energy he has to get out of bed when bills are due (or past due), and his barber shop needs to be opened, and crowdfunding needs to be mounted to support Watoto's kale chip business, and people are long on promises and short on results and coming through. It's the way he speaks to the block as one of its sons, a son raising daughters to resist and to embody the ideology of revolution that will promote transformative change in Baltimore and beyond. It's the way he strives to remain consistent and garner respect from other members of the community in order to make believers out of them.

The energy Natur puts in to everything he cares about does not always yield a commensurate return, but it is necessary in order for him to get almost any returns moving forward. And not just from his girls, but from all those to which his ministry is directed. That is the affective labor in practice as labors of love. Moreover, Natur does not get paid when he stands in unity with other activists and marches to support causes he cares about. Even working with Watoto to perform at events in line with their beliefs and ideology don't often pay their bills, and not every cause/event can

afford to pay them for their performances. Yet, the work they do, to tug at hearts and light a fire of inspiration in their audiences is important. Their work to rouse their brothers and sisters from states of ignorance, apathy, despair, and/or weariness in the struggle is critical, yet, they dwell in the realm of the affective, which can be relegated to that of realm of the “pie in the sky” and/or novelty, depending upon the audience.

However, all this sustained effort and output of energy can take a toll. On more than one occasion Natur has mentioned that often times activism doesn't pay, at least from a financial perspective. In fact, it has a tremendous cost that must be paid out of some of the dearest things he has to offer: family time, (at times meager) financial resources, and the energy he needs in order to survive. Even so, survival outside of the day-to-day mundane tasks and chores he and others must undertake requires these sacrifices on a consistent basis to ensure that there is any future worth having and looking forward to. Natur must ask things like, “What happens if I don't open my barbershop for days on end? What happens if I don't promote events to educate members of his community on topics like investing and financial freedom to eating healthy for a better quality of life?” He deems the cost of not pushing far too great. Even so, over time, he has learned the value of self-preservation in order to live and fight another day.

With this, it is critical to contemplate Natur and the labor in the affective labor he carries out day in and day out. Whitney argues that the labor in affective labor is “not merely assuming the postures and gestures of the requisite effects but also the

labor of ‘managing feeling.’”²⁹⁵ However, she offers useful critiques, informed by Kathi Weeks among others, of Arlie Hochschild’s analysis of affective labor as alienation and detachment from one’s own true feelings.²⁹⁶ I assert that Natur is not detached from his feelings. He genuinely loves working on behalf of his people, and he does so out of love for his family, both immediate and extended (i.e. out from Baltimore and onto the shores of any place that a person of African descent calls home.) Yet, Natur is vulnerable in different areas of his personal and professional life, not just because of his beliefs, but because of the tremendous amount of energy it takes to manage his emotions and resources in the midst of an environment that can be unpredictable and predictable in ways that are not always in service of his goals. I was spurred to ask, what does he do with disappointments? Moreover, how does he handle the disappointments of the pre-adolescent and adolescent girls of Watoto when things don’t go their way? What face(s) must he maintain to keep pushing with the right posture to promote the movement? What are the costs, if any?

What is also critical here is that we may explore the affective labor of Natur in the context of whether or not it is commodified or not. I would contend that Natur’s affective labor is not commodified, especially not in the context of looking at those who work in health services, food service, and the like. The affective labor as alienation or inauthenticity argument may paint all of its forms as inherently dangerous, but Whitney cautions us against this and highlights important ways what she terms as “noncommodified forms of affective labor” are fundamental to “basic

²⁹⁵ Whitney, *Affective Indigestion*, 281.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

human relationships and self-care.”²⁹⁷ An example would be the give and take of friendship where one manages his/her/their emotions to promote a healthy relationship in the hope (but not demand) of reciprocity. Natur’s affective labor, which he uses in his endeavors to support his children and other members of his community, is a noncommodified form of affective labor, but it isn’t without challenges. It costs time, and intellectual, emotional, and physical energy among other things. Its existence also runs parallel to products and services Natur does sell for money, without the corrupting influence that is possible when the aim is maximizing profit over everything else. An example is Natur’s work as a barber.

As noted previously, there is a long history of Black barbers and barbershops in the United States. They provide sacred spaces for Black Americans to fellowship with each other and to speak their minds. There is also a deeply personal and tender element to “the laying on of hands” that occurs when one gets his or her hair cut.²⁹⁸ Jason Parham shares his thoughts on the power of Black barbershops, the experience of going to a barber, and what it means to him and others like him:

Much of its power is culled from its communal ethos: for hours, men rhapsodize about sports or dating or music or The First Black President. In this way, the space is a lot like fire — it crackles and yaps and roars. It is a warmth desperately yearned for. An identity less afforded to the barbershop is how intimate and vulnerable of a place it can be. The hiss of clippers clicks on, and your head suddenly becomes a canvas — it is the barber as sculptor and as counselor. Maybe he cradles your head like so, fading your sides with a hushed confidence, or maybe he tilts your chin upward, lining your beard and going on about his kids and the importance of “being there” for people when they need you. If barbering is a kind of art, then the relationship the barber has

²⁹⁷ Whitney, *Affective Indigestion*, 283.

²⁹⁸ Personal note from Sheri Parks.

to his artwork, the client, is defined by these moments of tenderness and a genuine, knowing trust.²⁹⁹

The tenderness and trust that occurs during an exchange at the barbershop is about more than just money for Natur or a haircut for his customers.

Quincy T. Mills, Ayana D. Byrd, and Lori L. Tharp note that Black barbers and hairstylists have been fixtures in public life, as well as a sizable portion of the (successful) entrepreneurs in Black communities extending back to the days of slavery.³⁰⁰ Wealthy barbers helped to support their communities financially through donations to charities and churches; they also did so as they secured property and established other businesses.³⁰¹ In the days of slavery and during the antebellum period, Black barbers enjoyed a near monopoly of the available white clientele. Prosperous barbershop and spa owners catered to whites at exclusive locations and attended to their Black customers in separate facilities. However, in the time period between Reconstruction and the turn of the 20th century, Black barbers were forced out of their hold on the market. Some chose to focus on other endeavors to make a living, while others focused solely on their Black clientele moving forward.

Apart from substantive opportunities to contribute economically to their communities, Black barbershops and beauty salons provided places in the public

²⁹⁹ Jason Parham. “The Power and Politics of the Black Barbershop.” *The Fader.com*, October 11, 2017, <https://www.thefader.com/2017/10/11/black-barbershops-new-york-la-houston-new-orleans-essay-photos>.

³⁰⁰ Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umdcp/detail.action?docID=3442271>. Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharp, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2014).

³⁰¹ Byrd and Tharp, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, 71.

sphere where Black men and women could congregate and speak freely in safe spaces, both physically and culturally.³⁰² These safe spaces were and continue to be important politically. Mills and Melissa Harris-Lacewell (now Harris-Perry) note that Black people use barbershops and beauty shops as political spaces to exchange useful information and engage in “meaningful everyday black talk.”³⁰³ Black barbershops and beauty salons also hold tremendous potential to disseminate life-giving and life-saving information to members of the community. Stephen Thomas is at the forefront of public health work that envisions barbershops and salons in this way, especially in Maryland. His work as part of the team featured in Linnan et. al. highlight how Black barbershops and beauty salons can help address health disparities through community engagement and interventions based on the dissemination of health information.³⁰⁴ Natur’s Conscious Heads is fertile ground for educating others: it provides a space where members of the community can learn a trade, learn about Black history, and discuss politics, gender, race relations, sex, sports, popular culture, and myriad other topics. However, apart from being a hub, it has served and can evolve to continue to

³⁰² Mills, *Cutting along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America*, 3.

Melissa Victoria Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³⁰³ Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*, 167.

³⁰⁴ Laura Linnan, Stephen Thomas, Heather D’Angelo, and Yvonne Owens Ferguson, “African American Barbershops and Beauty Salons: An Innovative Approach to Reducing Health Disparities through Community Building and Health Education,” in *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health and Welfare*, ed. Meredith Minkler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/16464>.

serve as a lifeline to a population in need. Natur has already started to explore this through mentoring boys and providing a space for young women to style hair.

The “autonomous circuits of valorization” of which Hardt speaks are important as we continue to pursue the work of Natur and the ways both he and Watoto deploy love—Black love—and how it can do so much for their cause. Looking within for value (within oneself or group) is critical to Natur’s mission.³⁰⁵ I must also contemplate how much Black love requires of them. Whitney’s work is valuable here considering the space that Natur (and Watoto) occupies as a “raced” and “gendered” subject. Whitney argues that “we need to think about the ways in which part of what it means to be racialized is to be burdened with an exploitative kind of affective labor and its isolating effects.”³⁰⁶ The “affective indigestion” of which Whitney writes explores (in part) the metabolic by-products of racism and racialization: she discusses racism as indigestible affect.³⁰⁷ Through the work of Audre Lorde’s “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” Whitney reflects on Lorde’s anger as a metabolic by-product of being “‘force-fed’ racist hatred.”³⁰⁸ Quoting Lorde, Whitney offers that “the experience of racism is one of ‘metabolizing hatred like daily bread.’”³⁰⁹ So, in this vein, according to Whitney, what is the affective indigestion that Natur and so many others experience? Natur is not particularly angry if you consider his demeanor and the ways in which he approaches

³⁰⁵ Hardt, *Affective Labor*, 100.

³⁰⁶ Whitney, *Affective Indigestion*, 290. She continues that we need to consider the ways that white privilege is an affective privilege.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 287.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 287-288. Quoting Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 152.

his activism. Given this, the better question may be how does Natur effectively deal with affective indigestion based on the racism he is compelled to experience and subsequently address? Black love may be the answer.

Black Love as a Tool Outside of the Master's House: Affect in Effect

Natur must deal with the reality of living in a racist society. It is one where he is not spared hypervisibility in the eyes of the state (e.g. with the police and other agencies), or the impact of failing institutions like public schools, and economic divestment from his community and others close by. However, I contend the anger and frustration that Natur may feel as affective indigestion are things he channels into initiatives to educate his brothers and sisters about how to get free. Likewise, he also addresses the by-products of affective indigestion by calling the cause out by its name and exposing it for what it is every chance he gets. Black love, as I will discuss, can be mobilized as a powerful tool to confront the realities of living in a racist society, and it is so much more than Alka Seltzer to ease the indigestion racism causes. It also serves as a potent salve that helps to bind and soothe the wounds left by racism, be they centuries old or relatively new. These wounds, deep, wide, and festering, are the focus of much of Natur's energy. How can he help Black people concentrate on healing themselves and their communities?

Audre Lorde made it plain: the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.³¹⁰ Arguably, that declaration has been a particularly compelling one in the past year and a half, especially in the aftermath of the election of Donald J.

³¹⁰ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 110.

Trump. Here I consider the significance of Black love as a force, and as a viable and powerful tool that exists outside of the master's tool shed. Photographer, Reginald

Cunningham, poignantly writes:

Black love literally shouldn't exist in America, in any form. Familial, heterosexual, trans, queer, community, etc. Everything was done to prevent it. It is the purest form and most glaring example in American History to me, of resistance. The structure of slavery was such that love, as well as many other ideologies, would not develop. Families were separated several times over, mothers and fathers were killed, men, women, and children raped. Marriage was forbidden among blacks unless sponsored by a white person, and even then, that was only in certain states... White supremacy tried to kill the notion of black love, because it was a threat to oppression. White supremacy did its best to make 'black love' an oxymoron. A figment of our imagination. For many, it still is... The assault on black love, I think, had a two-fold yield though. It made black love stronger than any other form. We love hard, family and other, because our spirit knows what it's like not to have it.³¹¹

Cunningham's reference to loving hard also reminds me of kinds of love, Black love, that Sheri Parks explores in her work, *Fierce Angels*. She notes that the love of remarkable women like Harriet Tubman was "vigorous and protective," not the fluffy and sentimental kind peddled in popular discourse.³¹² Moreover, as Parks notes, "their love had consequences."³¹³ Cunningham continues by relating the tale, as told through an artifact currently on display at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), about a nine-year-old slave named Ashley who lived in South Carolina. Ashley's mother, Rose, gave her a cotton sack filled with a

³¹¹ Reginald Cunningham, "Black Love Is Revolutionary," *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-love-is-revolutionary_us_592d9a96e4b0a7b7b469cd6d.

³¹² Sheri Parks, *Fierce Angels: Living with a Legacy from the Sacred Dark Feminine to the Strong Black Woman*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 237.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

braid of her hair, three handfuls of pecans, and a tattered dress right before she was taken to the family to whom she was sold.

A (brief) narrative of this love offering was embroidered onto the sack itself by Ashley's granddaughter, Ruth Middleton.³¹⁴ Middleton sewed the details of her grandmother's final moments with her great-grandmother, which included an impartation of the love of a mother to her child in what we can assume are some of the last words Ashley heard from Rose. Rose said to Ashley, in reference to the cotton sack she gave to her, "It be filled with my love always." The line stands out among the other parts of the narrative as Middleton embroidered it in a different color; it was one of three colors she used for the piece. Additionally, the word "love" is set apart from the other words in the sentence, not only in its spacing but in its size (both in line with the other words in its row and on the entire sack itself). The fact that Middleton harnessed the power of that narrative, and could recount and visually convey the weight and the magnitude of the words her grandmother heard, makes a considerable impression.

Ashley must have felt the earnest love her mother sought to express (in person) one last time, and she could retell the story for generations to understand and retell with the full weight of all that moment entailed. Another line Middleton stitched, "She never saw her again," also helps to paint a compelling picture of the importance of her great-grandmother's and grandmother's final moments together. Rose was enslaved, helpless to prevent her nine-year old daughter from being sold out

³¹⁴ Middleton identified herself as Ashley's granddaughter at the end of the embroidered account, along with the year, 1921.

from under her, but she was also empowered enough to impart her undying love, Black love, to Ashley, whose face she would never see again. The reality that she probably had to do all of this in a matter of minutes is breathtakingly beautiful and painful all at once. We don't know what happened to Rose and Ashley after their separation apart from the fact they never saw each other again. However, what we do know is that Rose didn't let her little girl go without telling her and showing her how much she loved her.

Despite the cruelty and the brutality of living as chattel, I contend that Rose asserted her humanity with Black love as her chosen medium. And Cunningham's words and sentiments should not be lost here: *Black love is revolutionary*.³¹⁵ Also drawing from Natur, I contend that *Black love is life-giving and love-giving energy*.³¹⁶ Ruth Middleton stitched the word "Love" on her grandmother's keepsake bigger, bolder, and brighter than the other heartrending components of her ancestors' narrative, and I assert that is not an accident or a coincidence. She knew the power of the Black love that her great-grandmother imparted to her grandmother, Ashley, and how that love was big, bold, and enduring. Arguably, that love may have provided both Rose and Ashley with the strength to move beyond having their collective hearts ripped wide-open along with their final embrace. It may have also given them both the power move on, not from their love for each other or maybe even the pain of being separated, but with the power to get on with surviving and living and passing that love on to others within their families (and beyond): Rose passed it on to Ashley,

³¹⁵ The emphasis is mine.

³¹⁶ The emphasis is mine here as well.

and Ashley passed it along to Ruth and possibly countless others. Black love, that power to love and live is love-giving energy in action, and it can be nothing short of revolutionary. We see this revolutionary potential play out in the work of Natur and Watoto from the Nile, especially as they advocate love for self, family, and community.

Natur's mission is to put Black love to work and to deploy it as love-giving energy (LGE) in action both within his family and in his community. He is consistently engaged in what can be described as labors of love, both with the Sunz of N.A.T, the lectures and events he helps to organize and sponsor, and all of his work with Watoto, among other things. The concept of "labor" should not be lost on us, even if Natur calls it work. Yes, I considered it in an affective sense, yet I must also reflect on it in the physical, as well as the emotional and the figurative. Natur, as a man, recognizes he did not and could not physically give birth to any of his children, and he honors that as a role that only women have the ability and power to occupy. He also connects that role to the love-giving energy that is so important to his mission. This is critical in how it relates to the fact that all of the members of Watoto were and are girls or young women. That is something that isn't lost on Natur given the place he believes they occupy in an African-centered ideology that drives his approach to community building and activism. He has mentioned that people of African descent, Black people, are a mighty people, a people who have come from the woman.³¹⁷ Her place is one of reverence, even if complicated by considerations of

³¹⁷Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, April 27, 2015, Baltimore, MD, 2015.

what her place totally embodies and looks like through the lens of an African-centered ideology. Sexism and homophobia are arguably fixtures within African-centered ideology and have impacted how it has been deployed, though Lawrence Grandpre and Dayvon Love also argue the reality of that is starting to change.³¹⁸

A 2015 Facebook post credited to Natur highlights some of this: “All my years in the movement I have always been about changing the minds of our people, these girls are not just a group but here to change the world, come out today to experience this Love Giving Energy...”³¹⁹ This “Love Giving Energy,” or LGE as I will refer to it moving forward, is a force and one that Natur wants Watoto to employ and deploy in service of the Black people of Baltimore and beyond. It is also important here to note that Natur is not concerned about changing the minds of those outside of his community: in short, he’s not concerned about changing the minds of white people. What he wants is to speak to the hearts and the minds of his people, and Black love or love-giving energy (LGE) is his medium. White America didn’t give it to him or other people of African descent in this country, and they also can’t take it away; it is for Black people to acknowledge or not acknowledge, to use or not use.³²⁰ However, not harnessing the power of LGE is more than tragic, it is detrimental to the health and wellbeing of a people. Natur chooses to use Black love—LGE—to move

³¹⁸ Lawrence Grandpre and Dayvon Love, *The Black Book: Reflections from the Baltimore Grassroots*, ed. Jada Fletcher (Baltimore, MD: Leaders of A Beautiful Struggle, 2014), 45-47.

³¹⁹ Jabari Natur, Facebook post, March 1, 2015, 6:47 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/WatotoFromTheNile>

³²⁰ This reminds me of installment 623 of the podcast *This American Life*; it focuses on Afro Futurism and the unapologetically Black realms it embodies and inhabits. See <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/623/we-are-in-the-future>

forward. In chapter three, we discussed Natur's spiritual and intellectual journey, and some of the ways he has chosen to put what he has learned to work in service of his community through his parenting and other activism, Hip Hop music, and entrepreneurship, respectively. We need to explore this more, particularly with the consideration of how LGE is a driving force and influence behind much of what he does.

Black Love in Motion: Mobilizing Black Love

Natur's endeavors with Solvivaz Nation, though challenging at times, came from a place of awakening/enlightenment and love. Solvivaz originally started as a group devoted to activism and agitation through education and outreach on the community-level in Baltimore. An outgrowth of other African-centered and Pan-Africanist meetings where Natur saw himself as a young buck among the old, Solvivaz was an opportunity for he and likeminded peers to congregate, educate, and activate together. They promoted activist events and outreach to other members of the community, including those imprisoned. They also used Hip Hop as a tool to reach their peers and to spread the gospel of love for self, love for Black people, and love for community. The disagreements and the infighting that emerged among members of Solvivaz slowed their progress towards completing their established goals, and led to a hiatus of sorts in terms of group activities and outreach, but it did not kill the group itself.

Currently, Natur works with current members of Solvivaz to organize, sponsor, and promote events that educate the Black community on financial literacy and wealth production/management; healthy eating and living; and anti-racist activist

platforms, action, and history. An example is a recent event the Reality Speaks arm of the Solvivaz Nation sponsored titled, “What the Health: An African Centered Analysis of Black Health in America” with Dr. Llaila Afrika.³²¹ They offered it in September of 2017, sold tickets for the event out of Natur’s barbershop, Conscious Heads, and had the affair at a church that has played host to many Reality Speaks talks in the past. Solvivaz also provides opportunities for Black vendors to sell their wares through a marketplace alongside each venue, which includes selling Watoto from the Nile Raw Kale Chips. Certainly, creating these events, getting the word out, and managing them can be exhausting, but the power of LGE is not just in the deployment of its use to motivate and bring others into the fold: it also helps to nourish and restore energy to soldiers of the struggle like Natur who can get weary.

Natur’s work with Sunz of Nat, which ended with a profound financial loss, came from a desire to see LGE in action, especially through the use of Hip Hop as a medium that could really resonate with young people. Sunz of Nat’s first and only album, “Unify or Die,” though not profitable, led Natur to consider turning his artistic work in the area of music and production to his own girls and the birth of Watoto. One can see that Natur’s work with Watoto connects his love for his children with his love for the cause, the movement; it is a continuation of his ability to see the potential in young people to unite their talents and gifts with the struggle for enlightenment and freedom for Black people. He lit up when he recounted how Watoto got its name: from the girls. Their participation and enrollment in an African-centered school while

³²¹ Dr. Afrika specializes in African-centered approaches to education, physical health, and spiritual guidance.

they were young influenced them in such a way that they wanted to use Watoto as the group's moniker. Natur also beams with pride as he recalls how his middle daughter writes more and more lyrics and continues to take that on for Watoto.

Natur, however, is also a concerned father, not just an activist and an entrepreneur, and as such, he has had to table some of the goals of Watoto in deference to his role as a divorced father of two teenaged girls, and one pre-teen girl. Family dynamics have shaped the group's efforts over the years, and the past three to four years have been particularly trying.³²² Speaking with school teachers and administrators has taken the place of (some of the) rehearsals and sessions Natur used to plan for his family. However, his fight has extended out of wanting more oversight over his girls and their wellbeing. Natur still fights for the movement, but his efforts appear to be tempered more and more by whatever he needs to do to move towards being with his children full-time and supporting them, as well as himself, financially. During one of our interviews, Natur wore a shirt that bore the slogan, "Always daddying, never babysitting." That is a mantra of his, and one he takes seriously. His children are his primary ministry, and has been since they were small. Even so, the challenges of living life committed to the movement have taken a toll both on him and his family. His girls don't always want to wear a natural hairstyle or be the "conscious" one in the crowd and/or among friends at school.

Natur's own father died before the end of 2017, a man who had been plagued by drug use and abuse in his past. Natur made his peace with his father's passing, but

³²² In the past year, Natur challenged his ex-wife in court over custody of all three of his children.

his death came at a tense time of Natur fighting for custody of his children. He was excited to relay that his girls showed up for him; they came to his dad's funeral and paid their respects. That support was not lost on Natur—he appreciated and valued it so deeply, especially in light of the very tense climate in which he, his girls, and ex-wife are now living. He is a surrogate father of sorts as well, an otherfather, stepping into that role with other young people whose dads are not around. Some of the girls affiliated with Watoto are not children of Natur's biologically, but he cares for them just as if they are his own. These concepts of parenting as activism and “otherfathering” are important ones especially as they can serve as interventions in the lives of some of the most vulnerable members of different Black, communities in Baltimore. Moreover, the potential for positive generational impact should not be understated. Derrick Brooms's research focuses on otherfathering in the context of secondary education, and how Black male teachers assume that role in contributing to the education, guidance, and development of their students in an all-male, urban educational context.³²³ My exploration of otherfathering is within the context of a Black community outside of a structured educational context (e.g. public or private primary or secondary education); it also considers how otherfathering functions as a call to activism as well as activism itself.

As I use the term “otherfathering” and “otherfather” I draw from the work of Patricia Hill Collins, whose scholarship on Black feminist thought, “othermothers,” and the role of “othermothering” in Black communities serves to inform my

³²³ Derrick R. Brooms, “Black Otherfathering in the Educational Experiences of Black Males in a Single-Sex Urban High School,” *Teachers College Record* 119, no. 11 (2017): 1–46.

discussion here. Collins defines othermothers as women who are not the biological mothers (i.e. bloodmothers) of children they help to rear and guide, and she notes that othermothers “have been central to the institution of Black motherhood.”³²⁴ The existence of othermothers and othermothering extends from a recognition by African and African-American communities that “vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible.”³²⁵ She is also careful to highlight that the powerful presence of mothers does not erase the role of fathers who are engaged in the lives of their children and other children in their communities: in “woman-centered kin units...the centrality of mothers is not predicated on male powerlessness” (or absence).³²⁶ Collins also explores the links between othermothering and activism as a means to invest in Black communities and as a way “for conceptualizing Black women’s political activism.”³²⁷ The responsibility of caring for others helps to foster and engender care and concern for various members of the community.

We can see this with Natur’s background as he took care of his sisters’ children after he finished high school. Extrapolating from this, we see Natur’s otherfathering as a continuation and expansion of what he committed to in caring for his own kin at a younger age. Hill also notes how social consciousness is spurred in some Black women as they consider how challenges impact not only their children, but the children of others; through the lens of othermothering it is not a big jump to

³²⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2009), 192.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

see how advocating for your own children can be inextricably linked to advocating for someone else's children. Natur has also adopted this tradition as an otherfather, which is steeped in an African-centered ideology that values community and looking after the needs of more than just your own biological family.

Personal responsibility is another important mantra for Natur; he breathes it in and out like air. That, coupled with consistency, is something that he identifies as a means for him to be taken seriously. Anyone can walk the walk, but for how long? Hard work and persistence are hallmarks of Natur's life and struggle in almost every area of his life. He endeavors to learn from his mistakes, but also embrace the joys of life as a responsibility as well. As we were talking after one of our interviews, on his stoop looking out onto the corner near his house, he spoke briefly about his love of magic, as in pulling-a-rabbit-out-of-a-hat type magic. The smile that crossed his face when he spoke about delving into that world was refreshing and unexpected given the context of what we had discussed just minutes earlier. Yet, it was hopeful—not in the wistful way of those who regret the paths they have taken, but in a way that could conceivably convince someone that pursuing magic might just be a platform for transformative change as well! He did not say that, but it bears considering.

Natur regularly remarks about telling the girls of Watoto that they need to work hard in the group and elsewhere; these efforts are an extension of the immense amount of time and energy he puts into Solvivaz/Reality Speaks, Watoto from the Nile, Watoto from the Nile Raw Kale Chips, Conscious Heads, and the like. The girls of Watoto are a hearkening back to the life that comes through a woman. Though Natur would have most likely pursued his vision with boys if he and his ex-wife had

had them, it seemed almost providential that his pursuit of LGE and his mission to deploy it in his community continued with the birth of three girls who would form the first iteration of Watoto from the Nile. Around 2010, girls, three Black girls no less, brought his lyrics to life with an earnestness and innocence that were compelling.³²⁸ Their age and gender did not come across as a gimmick; they were/are his children. However, whatever Natur's marketing, there could be no doubt that these girls had some talent. Baltimore, took notice, and these queens had a platform, even if small in the beginning. These girls, represent life as well as love as Natur's own offspring, and the double role they occupy as an extension of himself both figuratively and literally, especially within the context of the movement, is one we should not underestimate. To Natur, children are love and life: love for oneself, love for community, and the future—the life—of the community to come. This may be why he invests so much of who he is into endeavors aimed at changing the hearts and minds of young people as well as peers his age. This is also why he mentors and otherfathers youths, both within and outside of Watoto. A couple of examples are Natur teaching boys the trade of barbering at his shop, and also his efforts to train up a new crop of young people to perform in Watoto. He started grooming one of his grandnieces to perform in the group a few years ago. His hope is that she will become a part of a younger set of performers to take up the mantle of Watoto when the older girls move on to other projects and aspirations.

³²⁸ I couldn't believe what I saw and heard when I watched Watoto's "Letter to Mr. Wayne" on YouTube several years ago. I was moved and impressed by their content and delivery, especially given how young the girls were at the time of the video's release.

Part of Natur’s mission is to help others awaken and gain a more genuine consciousness about the world around them. On more than one occasion I heard Natur, a member of Watoto, or a part of Watoto’s entourage and wider family circle say, “watch the watchers.” They are all intimately aware of the fact that they work under intense scrutiny. The neoliberal climate in which they—we all—live is not one to take lightly. And, the project is to turn that gaze back on those who may seek to not only disrupt, but destroy. Watching the watchers comes from narratives of state interference in groups who sought to protect themselves and call attention to inequality and brutal injustices in this country.

One such instance (among many) is a talk Natur and Solviva Nation sponsored in late 2014, through their Reality Speaks series. It was a talk given by Marshall “Eddie” Conway, a member of the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and early 1970s. It focused on his experience as a Black Panther, his knowledge about COINTELPRO, its impact on his group, and its devastating impact on other groups similar to the Panthers that were considered threats.³²⁹ Conway spent 44 years in prison for the shooting death of Donald Sager, a Baltimore police officer, for which Conway and his supporters maintain his innocence.³³⁰ In fact, he was considered a political prisoner by some of his supporters, some of whom

³²⁹ COINTELPRO is a short-form name for the Counter Intelligence Program carried out by federal/local agents and officers to “neutralize” different groups deemed subversive (read: dangerous). Ava Duvernay’s film “13th” provides compelling images that showcase the raw brutality of the state in regard to the crackdowns on the Black Panther Party and others deemed similarly subversive.

³³⁰ Jessica Anderson, “Ex-Black Panther Leader Plans Community Service after Release in Officer’s Killing,” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/crime/bs-md-ci-eddie-conway-release-folo-20140305-story.html>.

were prominent on the local and national stage. Conway challenged his 1970 conviction and he was allowed to go free on time served given that his case was impacted “by a ruling in which Maryland’s high court said verdicts before 1980 were invalid because of faulty jury instructions.”³³¹ Conway stated after his release, and maintained during his Reality Speaks talk, that he and his peers in the Black Panthers were targeted by the state:

Conway said that during his trial, the Black Panther Party was being attacked, with many members being jailed. Supporters have said the Black Panthers were being monitored by group[s] of federal and local law enforcement agents whose mission was to ‘neutralize’ organizations deemed subversive...Conway said he hopes those opponents understand that his conviction came about in a politically charged time... ‘I hope people on the other side of that spectrum will recognize the climate of those times and recognize the conditions of those times.’³³²

Events like the one outlined are part of Natur’s mission in order to educate members of his community about their African history, a noble history that did not begin with slavery in the Americas. Part of their mission is to also educate community members about America’s racist past and present. This is part and parcel of a greater mission to motivate others to take this information and use it to not only be informed but to act. However, this also shows Natur’s connection to a broader community of activists and people who have been immersed in the decades-long struggle against racism and the neoliberal arms of the state. These efforts are also a form of Black love especially as a countercultural act in accepting Conway and embracing him (and people like him) after a lengthy prison sentence. Educating others and embracing those deemed cast

³³¹ Jessica Anderson, “Ex-Black Panther Leader Plans Community Service after Release in Officer’s Killing.” Even so, Conway’s conviction will stand.

³³² Ibid.

offs in our society, specifically those emerging from the prison industrial complex, are important components of Natur's mission to move his people forward.

Another former mainstay of Natur and Solvivaz's talk circuit was comedian and civil rights activist, Richard "Dick" Gregory. Gregory, a predecessor to Bill Cosby in terms of breaking boundaries and performing stand-up routines in front of all-white audiences in the 1950s, was a former presidential candidate on the Freedom and Peace Party ticket, a fierce advocate on a range of issues related to injustice, especially racial injustice, and an earnest health food promoter.³³³ He was also labeled a conspiracy theorist given his suspicions about the murders of prominent figures like John and Robert Kennedy, as well as Martin Luther King, among other atrocities to which he called attention.³³⁴

Gregory, affectionately known as Baba (father) Gregory, served as the main feature for several Reality Speaks venues, even offering to take his pay later if turnout was lower than expected. He could riff on anything and everything from state aggression to the dangers of eating unhealthily, particularly in light of corporate interests that veered away from providing affordable options that promoted a healthy diet. Additionally, tickets for these events were mostly advertised through the Solvivaz email listserve and Facebook networks, along with word-of-mouth. Moreover, you could only pay tickets and most featured goods in cash, which enabled

³³³ In fact, Gregory was diagnosed with lymphoma years prior to his death, and he rejected traditional western medicine in deference to regular consumption of healthy foods and a mix of vitamins. His lymphoma went into remission with this approach to treating his condition.

³³⁴ Clyde Haberman, "Dick Gregory, 84, Dies; Found Humor in the Civil Rights Struggle," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/19/arts/dick-gregory-dies-at-84.html>.

sponsors and vendors to avoid paying fees to credit card companies and other third parties not situated within their community. Everyone's Place, a Penn North neighborhood, African-centered store located near the epicenter of the Baltimore uprising, has been a central place to purchase tickets (in cash) for Solviva events. This, along with the vendors who attend these events promote a climate where people can invest in not only the event, but the community involved in offering the event; it is a community where the people invest in getting to know each other and sow financially into local business owners/ventures.

Many of the aforesaid events drew mostly adults, yet some youths (outside of the girls of Watoto) attended with family members and/or friends as well. Natur wants to speak to the youth. Watoto is an obvious avenue given that they are youths themselves, but Natur uses various outlets for this portion of his mission. His African-centered ideology constructs and maintains Black people as kings and queens, heirs to a noble and royal history originating in Africa. He emphasizes that with the girls of Watoto, consistently emphasizing they are queens. The girls themselves have internalized those messages with a recent song titled, "Queens," written entirely by group members. It continues with some of the themes featured in Queen Latifah's 1993 Hip Hop song, "U.N.I.T.Y.," which also addressed issues of women being referred to as bitches and hoes (a slang term for whores), domestic violence, and violence among Black youths.

The response to the performances I attended were that of support and even respect for what Natur and the girls of Watoto were doing. He encouraged them to engage the crowd, not just sing the songs for the audience. The younger kids in

attendance were more likely to get into it, while the older ones were subtler in their support (e.g. slight head nods), if they showed any signs of support at all. Girls were more apt to do so than boys. And this is consistent with Natur's observation that it was difficult to get boys to support Watoto. He could persuade mothers and fathers to bring their daughters, but it was particularly difficult to get fathers to bring their sons. Lastly, adults (myself included), would clap during some of their songs, but often nodded their heads and sometimes swayed. The girls of Watoto, especially in its later years, put forth a lot of energy during their performances, and sometimes, they had a crowd that would give back that energy almost pound for pound. Other times, it was clear that the audience was not going to respond in a way to affirm the group's talent or message. There could be many different reasons for that, but regardless of the reasons, the impact on Watoto was a concern for Natur: keeping the girls encouraged and motivated when interest and money ebbed was difficult. Even when the interest and compliments were there, the material support was slow to follow.

Natur and his peers from Solvivaz Nation also aimed to provide a conscious alternative to the Hip Hop of his youth, which mostly focused on violence against other Black people, money, the subjugation and (sexual) objectification of women, and other nihilistic pursuits deemed marketable to a large (increasingly white) audience. Though their Hip Hop projects never materialized beyond a few smaller projects, he continued on with a younger group of teenagers through Sunz of Nat. Their project also fell short of Natur's expectations, but he continued with Watoto, in its different iterations, even mentoring and organizing a younger group of children to take up the mantle of Watoto when its older members inevitably move on to other

projects. One such project in the works is a group comprised of older teens and young adults who will focus on content that will reach and resonate with an older peer group.

The initial goal was for Solvivaz to provide an alternative to the negative Hip Hop that had become more and more prolific. The alternative would offer quality in its form but a revolutionary message as its function. There were to be no weak raps in the service of making people more conscious; the goal was to help people get free while bumpin' conscious (freedom) music in their cars and nodding their heads as rhythmically and vigorously as they did to the likes of Jay-Z, Lil' Jon, or Ja Rule. However, this was easier said than done, as one might imagine. For example, while members of Sunz of Nat could really spit (rap) and were down for rapping about causes important to the movement, Natur could not prevent them from gravitating towards more commercial opportunities or other opportunities in general (e.g. college). Additionally, you need to keep up with what is going on in contemporary culture and rap/Hip Hop in order to speak to young people effectively. Keeping an ear to the street for trends and the like also poses the potential of luring you there.

Currently, Watoto provides music that borrows from contemporary songs and beats, but provides a revolutionary message aimed towards enlightening other youths and adults in their community. Their latest EP, "Resurrection," plays host to four songs: "The Watchers," "Chi Raq," "Black Wallstreet," and "Queen." Their offerings on "Resurrection" differ from their previous album, "The Chosen One," in terms of content, which is a direct reflection of the ages and maturity levels of Watoto's members. (The youngest is currently 12 while the oldest is 20). The content on

“Resurrection” is harder, edgier, not just addressing what the girls involved (and Natur) have seen since the group’s inception (e.g. police brutality, drug addiction), but consistent issues that need to be addressed (e.g. disrespect of Black women and girls). It is important to emphasize that Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and a host of other young Black people were killed during Watoto’s existence, and they responded with songs and/or musical commentaries about their murders and the anti-Black climate that made them possible, and maybe even inevitable.

Additionally, Watoto broaches not only the racism rampant in our nation, but the compassion and resistance offered by Black people both proactively and in response to racist murders and profiling. A song titled, “Trayvon Martin,” is featured on their album, “The Chosen One,” and in it they called attention to the fact that a nation—Black people—were in mourning over the brutal death of Martin and the circumstances around which his life could be taken with impunity:

Watoto here with a warning
Right now our nation’s in mournin’
We hope that justice prevails soon
The Martin family we’re with you
We come together we must care
The negative can go elsewhere
I put my hoodie on while weeping
Because this case is so misleading

Right now our nation in mourning
We want justice
And you want it, don’t ya
We can feel it
‘Cause we been waitin’ for it since it happened after over a month
Watoto tellin’ the story
And please don’t even try to ignore me
This situation is racist
You black and in hoodie we suspicious people showin’ no love

Trayvon, we are your family

We come together rollin' with your mommy and daddy
This situation is crazy
But still we waitin' patient for this case they seem be tryin' to ignore us
See the police they were sloppy
Ohhhhhh
They approached him as blindly
Ohhhhhh
And Zimmerman is so crazy
He knew it wasn't right like came until I hear them sangin' the same song
Watoto here with a warning...³³⁵

Watoto continues the song with verses that catalogue the conversation between Martin and his girlfriend as Zimmerman persisting in stalking him, elaborating on what he might have been feeling being hunted without cause. This was important given the fact that the girls wrote this song themselves. Trayvon was only about five years older than the oldest girl of the group when he was killed. They recognized kinship with a contemporary of theirs over 800 miles away who could have easily been on their own block. Arguably, the revolutionary component here was not just calling attention to the injustice of Martin's death (and the aftermath of Zimmerman's delayed trial and subsequent acquittal), but the love and compassion they offered was part of a tradition of revolutionary Black love for Martin as extended family.

As Watoto grows, Natur gives the girls more latitude and encourages them to write more and more of their own content. Collaborations are also encouraged, which is exactly what happened when the girls teamed up with Boyce Watkins, a finance scholar, social commentator, and entrepreneur who specifically promotes Black

³³⁵ Watoto from the Nile. "Trayvon Martin." *The Chosen One*, Solvivaz Records: Baltimore, MD, 2015.

entrepreneurship as a way to “get off the corporate plantation.”³³⁶ Watkins has also been vocal about the racist massacre (also known as the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921) that occurred in the Greenwood section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, resulting in the devastating loss of life, property, and overall wealth of the community known as Black Wall Street. Historians John Hope Franklin and Scott Ellsworth quoted Walter White, an expert on racial violence of the time, in their overview of the Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. They, along with White, paint a painfully vivid picture of the aftermath of the riots and aggression against this prominent, Black Tulsa community:

By any standard, the Tulsa race riot of 1921 is one of the great tragedies of Oklahoma history. Walter White, one of the nation’s foremost experts on racial violence, who visited Tulsa during the week after the riot, was shocked by what had taken place. ‘I am able to state’ he said, ‘that the Tulsa riot, in sheer brutality and willful destruction of life and property, stands without parallel in America.’ Indeed, for a number of observers through the years, the term ‘riot’ itself seems somehow inadequate to describe the violence and conflagration that took place. For some, what occurred in Tulsa on May 31 and June 1, 1921 was a massacre, a pogrom, or, to use a more modern term, an ethnic cleansing. For others, it was nothing short of a race war. But whatever terms is used, one thing is certain: when it was all over, Tulsa’s African American district had been turned into a scorched wasteland of vacant lots, crumbling storefronts, burned churches, and blackened, leafless trees.³³⁷

In discussing the Black Wall Street massacre, Watkins also promotes Dorian Chandler’s documentary film, “Resurrecting Black Wall Street: The Blue Print,”

³³⁶ Boyce Watkins, “No Title,” *Www.boycewatkins.com*, 2017, <http://boycewatkins.com/dr-boyce-watkins/>.

³³⁷ John Hope Franklin, “Tulsa Still Hasn’t Faced the Truth About the Race Riot of 1921,” *History News Network*, April 29, 2007. <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/38175>

along with his own projects and entrepreneurial products/events to encourage Black entrepreneurship.

Watkins preaches a gospel that focuses on Black people moving away from relying on securing and maintaining jobs in within corporate, white America. He invests in a platform of Black, financial and economic literacy that is based primarily on Black ownership of businesses. Given Boykins's stance on how to build wealth and secure economic freedom, Natur and Watoto teamed up with Boykins for a musical (Hip Hop) project, where we can hear clips of Boykins speaking about the 1921 massacre in between Watoto members rapping. The result of that collaboration, "Black Wallstreet," is not just a venture to inform others about what occurred in Tulsa in the early 20th century, but also a means to encourage and inspire Black people to invest in themselves and their own communities again. The members of Watoto, dressed in all black in the music video for the song, rap and sing before a background of alternating pictures of the Greenwood section of Tulsa before and after the massacre; images of enslaved Africans and lynched Black Americans surrounded by white mobs; Black Lives Matter signs and protests, Dylann Roof,³³⁸ Freddie Gray, and slogans like "Black is the new Black," among other images. With this background, the girls rap about being heartbroken and outspoken all at once, hearkening to a time when Black people thrived in enclaves of their own making, and how those times can return with Black unification.

You ain't no man
Do the things that you did
Kill my sister, kill my brother, kill my woman and kids

³³⁸ Roof is the man convicted for the 2015 murder of nine Black parishioners of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

What type of man
Drop a bomb to be violent
Takin' pictures you smilin'
Homeless rate of 10,000
You ain't no man
Bombs and guns you start pilin'
Straight to racial profilin'
Kill up hundreds you wilin'
What kind of man is down for causin' a riot
Fill your hateful desire
Tried to crush our empire

They say the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice
They say the blacker the town the tighta the noose
We put our money together and put it to use
We were securing our future we rep for the youth
600 businesses booming successful and tall
We had the schools and the buses and movies and all
Hospital and places to go we put gas in the tank
And if you needed some money we go to the bank

Uh
Now what y'all know about that
Everything was all black
Millionaires was all black
Ownership was all black
Because the money circulated like a 100 times
To another hand that was black as mine
Nowadays if it turn once it's good
Takin' all the money out the neighborhood
Burn us to the ground
Now we built again
Super attitude that was made to win
48 billion every year would come in
Compare to today and you wouldn't comment

You ain't no man...³³⁹

Watoto ends its video for the song with Boykins discussing how integration destroyed Greenwood's efforts at rebuilding and restoring its legacy to what it once was along

³³⁹ Watoto from the Nile, "Black Wall Street Video Featuring Dr. Boyce Watkins" (YouTube, August 10, 2015), https://youtu.be/2vUV_S1RY_8.

with his query, “Was integration really good for us as Black people?”³⁴⁰ Watoto calls for unification in their song, based in part on a slogan voiced by Natur and other members of the movement, “Unify or Die,” and “Black Wallstreet,” is an example of how important it is for young people to understand the history—that Black people did indeed thrive in their own enclaves—and, that can be the future with the right priorities and mobilization. This message coming from a group of youths juxtaposed against the reality that there are no more living witnesses to the massacre is arguably a powerful and compelling one about the importance of knowing and learning from one’s history.

As we can see, music is a powerful tool, and one that Natur has used to showcase the talent and gifts of the members of Watoto, past and present. However, Natur has also worked to provide other outlets for (young) people to learn and grow within their communities. One such outlet is Natur’s barbershop, Conscious Heads. He currently teaches boys and young men how to barber, using his shop as a training and mentoring space.³⁴¹ Conscious Heads, along with Watoto from the Nile Raw Kale Chips are entrepreneurial in their goals to put Black people, especially young Black people to work in Baltimore. The challenges of these undertakings vary slightly, but they are important to highlight.

³⁴⁰ Watoto from the Nile, “Black Wall Street Video Featuring Dr. Boyce Watkins.”

³⁴¹ I stumbled across this information in a conversation with a friend whose grandnephew is one of Natur’s mentees/trainees.

Watoto from the Nile Raw Kale Chips have been sold mostly in the Baltimore through its own website and in mostly Black-owned/operated venues (e.g. variety stores, cafes, restaurants). However, funding to expand the business has been a consistent challenge. In May of 2015, Natur and Watoto launched another crowdsourcing campaign to raise \$50,000 to promote and expand operations for the company. With the slogan, “Help Save the Kale Revolution!,” Natur rallies others to donate in order to promote a local, healthy (vegan), snack with minimal processing and ingredients.³⁴² Additionally, Natur notes that donations will be used for “new packaging to improve the shelf life and overall look of products; industrial kitchen dehydrators; commercial grade refrigerators; commercial stainless steel counter tops and work tables; distribution and marketing; and jobs opportunities for young people.”³⁴³ Watoto’s GoFundMe page also mentions that distribution was put on hold as it reached its maximum output based on limited resources and could not keep up with demand.³⁴⁴ As of July of 2017, distribution resumed to several businesses in the Baltimore area and one in Capitol Heights, MD, which is right outside of Washington, D.C.³⁴⁵

Natur sees Watoto’s kale chips as an opportunity to engage not only the members of Watoto (which includes passing down a business for them to run in the future), but it proffers opportunities for young people in Baltimore to work and

³⁴² Watoto from the Nile Raw Kale Chips, “Help Save the Kale Revolution!,” *GoFundMe*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.gofundme.com/kalerevolution>.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ Watoto from the Nile Raw Kale Chips, “Kale Revolution: Watoto from the Nile,” *Facebook*, accessed October 23, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/WatotoFromTheNileKaleChips/>.

possibly learn how to become entrepreneurs in the process.³⁴⁶ Moreover, it is not an accident that Natur and Watoto are operating a raw kale chip business. Part of their message has consistently focused on healthy minds *and* healthy bodies. One of their songs from *The Chosen One* album is aptly titled “Kale Revolution,” and that is what Natur wants to see: a revolution around Black-based/owned economic advancement that brings young people into the fold, replicates itself, and promotes healthy bodies, minds, senses of self, and bank accounts. The legacy potential here should not be understated, and it is one of Natur’s main objectives.

Natur continues to promote different events/venues through Reality Speaks and Solvivaz, alongside his work with Watoto, and other entrepreneurial projects. He has maintained that the movement is bigger than just his own brood, and it has to be in order for his vision to be fully realized. This is a crucial element of the LGE we discussed earlier. Black love serves as love-giving energy and also life-giving energy, both of which function as part of Natur’s modus operandi. He taps into LGE to do all that he does and to keep going when things are tight and the way seems more than just a little obstructed.

I assert that Natur’s current activities and endeavors position him right in the middle of the continuum of the Black Radical tradition. He believes in training young Black men and women to be leaders and to use their gifts and talents to educate, elevate, and motivate others within their communities. He also believes that Black people need to invest in themselves economically, to endeavor to strengthen and nurture their own without an expectation of assistance from corporate America and/or

³⁴⁶ Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, June 8, 2015, Baltimore, MD, 2015

the state. Models of this exist in the history of Africans in America, and he roundly references them whenever he can. Natur is also a Pan Africanist who is situated in Baltimore, and he isn't going anywhere. He believes in a brotherhood of Africans across the world, as well as in the rich history, culture, and publics built by Africans here in the U.S. He wants to continue to advocate for both ideals to thrive.

Natur and Ta-Nehisi Coates are contemporaries, Baltimore born and raised, but with slightly different paths to educating others. Coates, a writer and MacArthur Foundation grant winner, remains dubious about the outcome of anti-racist agitation in his lifetime not because he does not believe that Black Americans (and their allies) should resist, but because he sees American racist structures as so deeply rooted and entrenched in our country's ontology and epistemological approaches to everything; he flatly makes that known without apology, and, to some degree, without recourse.³⁴⁷ Natur, on the other hand, has used music, business ventures, grassroots activism, and community education to agitate for change, but his focus is on change first within Black communities themselves. He is more hopeful, while still realistic about the immense challenges we continually face on a community level (i.e. block, city, state) and in this nation.

To do what Natur does takes a tremendous amount of intellectual, emotional, and even physical energy, along with financial resources that don't always materialize when they are most urgently needed. He knows his efforts won't always be rewarded

³⁴⁷ Jeffrey Pierre, "His Ideology Is White Supremacy': Ta-Nehisi Coates on Donald Trump," *Morning Edition, NPR*, September 7, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/09/07/549098169/his-ideology-is-white-supremacy-ta-nehisi-coates-on-donald-trump>.

financially. In fact, he speaks candidly about exactly how they won't. As he mentioned, unlike a preacher who is an activist, he doesn't get a paycheck if he doesn't cut hair, or sell kale chips, or book an event. Showing up to protest is important, but Natur has to balance those activities with other enriching activities that will also help pay the bills, and bills are entities that are never in short supply. But apart from the financial costs, Natur spends a lot of his energy on motivating others: his children, other people's children, other adults, fellow entrepreneurs and peers in the struggle, among others. He keeps getting up every day whether or not his bills are paid in full, whether or not his kids have made it to school consistently, and whether or not his lifelong project of advocating for revolutionary change has taken any discernible steps forward of late. What is the toll? Natur mentioned that "no...progress has been made without the shedding of blood."³⁴⁸ Does that mean he is figuratively shedding his own to move his vision forward? Is LGE his proverbial fountain of youth for him or an interminable drain on his own emotional and psychological stores. Perhaps the answers are yes to all, and where will that leave him and Watoto? After his death, one of Dick Gregory's children remarked that for Gregory, the struggle always came first.³⁴⁹ I'm spurred to ask, "What will Natur's children say about him when his life comes to a close?"

³⁴⁸ Natur, interview, May 11, 2015.

³⁴⁹ Clyde Haberman, "Dick Gregory, 84, Dies; Found Humor in the Civil Rights Struggle," *The New York Times*, August 2017.

Chapter 5: Preparing (for) Neo

[We're a] proud and mighty people. Comin' from the woman. Those girls. [They] bring life and love back to music. It's a ministry. Neo and the Matrix. I'm Morpheus and y'all [Watoto] are Neo. You're the one. They do stuff, and it's like wow. It's happening, it's happenin.' Fightin' against the machine. The propaganda machine.³⁵⁰

–*Jabari Natur*

As long as the matrix exists, the human race will never be free. – *Morpheus* from “The Matrix”³⁵¹

The Coming of Neo

Natur, an avid movie watcher as a youth, especially before his awakening, uses the narratives of films to highlight his thought process and critical emotions about his personal evolution and that of his life's work. In this case, Natur's references to Neo of *The Matrix* trilogy, help to frame his beliefs about Watoto's function and its potential to change the world and those around them. Given that, it is helpful to (re)visit “The Matrix” narrative as it illuminates Natur's view of who Watoto is and can be.

To Natur, Watoto is Neo, a character who is “asleep” for the first portion of his life but who is also destined for something greater that will impact the rest of humankind. At the beginning of the first film in *The Matrix* trilogy, we witness Neo living a double life. In one setting he peddles in illicit technology and moonlights as a hacker, and in another, he functions as a subdued computer programmer for a large corporation. Over time he feels a yearning to know more, a curiosity about what

³⁵⁰ Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, April 27, 2015, Baltimore, MD, 2015.

³⁵¹ The Wachowski Brothers, *The Matrix* (USA: Warner Home Video, 1999).

comes to be known as “the matrix.” It is important that Neo is asleep, at least partially. He is awakened from his sleepwalking and “sleepwaking” by a beckoning of sorts, through which he is introduced to Morpheus (by way of Trinity, a love interest and side kick), who is eagerly looking for him, too. Enabled and shepherded by Morpheus, a powerful actor in the resistance movement against the machines that seek to consume and exterminate their human existence, Neo becomes painfully aware of the reality that exists for human beings. A war between humans and machines produced a post-apocalyptic world of ruin, and humans were reduced to a power source for the machines. Since losing this power struggle, humans are not born as much as they are replicated, and when these human “batteries” die, they are liquefied and fed to the living intravenously as fuel. Unknowingly, forcibly, humans are conditioned to be cannibals, preying upon their own in serving the needs of the machines and the matrix they operate.

Morpheus, wise, powerful, and zealous though he was, could not bring about the transformative change necessary to dismantle the oppressive system in which they lived and slumbered in servitude to the matrix. Morpheus’s role, instead, was to guide Neo and help him reach his full potential as Neo was “the (chosen) one.” To that end, Morpheus taught Neo everything he knew: principally, how to know the truth and to *wake up*, how to fight, how to resist, and how to escape when necessary. And in turn, Neo’s role was to help usher in the revolution that would change their world forever for the better. However, before Neo’s full potential is realized and unleashed, he must come to the knowledge of who he is.

In one of the final scenes in *The Matrix*, Neo is presumably dead: Mr. Smith, the leading agent charged with destroying Neo and humankind, beat him to the phone call he needed to return to safety, riddling his body full of bullets. He flat lined. Yet, Trinity (his partner) refused to accept his death. She whispered to him about The Oracle's prophesy that she would fall in love with "the one," and because of that, he couldn't be dead. After whispering this revelation, she told him to get up...and he did. Bemused, Mr. Smith began to shoot at Neo again, but this time, Neo, with a confident "No" and a raised hand, halted the hail of bullets in mid-air and silenced Mr. Smith's weapon. Neo then released the bullets from their frozen state to fall to the ground as he prepared to destroy Mr. Smith by diving head-first into his startled body. With that act, Neo dismantled and neutralized Mr. Smith's agenda, at least for a short period of time. This act also prepares us for what remains in the trilogy as Neo and his peers continue to resist and press towards freedom for humankind.

The *Matrix* narrative provides vital context as I consider Natur's journey and the evolution of Watoto. The *Matrix* trilogy as a whole overtly and covertly engages its audience with a story about oppression, apathy, awakenings, and resistance to marginalization, dehumanization, and extermination. The fact that Neo is figuratively a youth (especially in comparison to Morpheus, The Oracle, etc.), and literally youths in the case of Watoto, should not be lost on us. Additionally, Neo was restored and brought back to life by love, in the film's case romantic love, in Watoto's case family love and love for community. In both scenarios, love gave (and gives) them the strength and power to access their full potential and to destroy the agent(s) of death who stood and stand in their way.

In this vein, Natur sees Watoto as an important part of the current and future struggle for freedom. His goals cannot be accomplished without the youth here now, as well as the youth of the future. Bearing in mind this simple premise, we need to appreciate the young people of Baltimore as the future of the movement based on Natur's vision and belief in the power and importance of cultivation. With that, we need to also explore young people as important subjects in their own right. Moreover, attention to youth as subjects must reflect upon the challenges they face in asserting and assuming their personhood in this critical climate, not just in Baltimore, but in many neighborhoods in America.

Challenges in Contemporary Baltimore

Baltimore's setting of mass incarceration, state surveillance and police brutality, neighborhood violence, food deserts, and drug addiction is what Watoto has used as the partial soundtrack to their experience and activism. How they channel their feelings and experiences has been shaped by Natur. They have been able to grow and use their talents and gifts to speak to the realities of their environment, but they offer more than one view of the reality that exists. The idea that there is a king and queen inside every Black person is not a novel concept as we have established earlier in this work, but it is still revolutionary in the sense that it challenges what many Black people see and hear in their everyday lives. Natur and Watoto are part of a historical response to anti-blackness and the project of racism deployed in opposition to Black love, be that through self and community actualization of all kinds.

Their platform to promote self-love and self-knowledge resists entrenched efforts to diminish, erase, and ignore the contributions that Black people have made not only to American society, but to the world before ancestors of African descent were brought to the Americas, and in times since. The importance of knowing African and African-American history is a critical project for Natur and Watoto, especially in light of the fact that they believe they cannot depend on mainstream public schools to teach the history lessons they seek to discuss and internalize. This is why Natur sent his children to an African-centered school during their formative years. Self-knowledge and self-exploration is important to Natur and to Watoto. What follows offers Black subjectivity in the context of what is happening in Baltimore right now, and how young people are experiencing life in and around the city in light of all of its challenges.

Young people feel, speak, and act on behalf of others, even when we don't realize that they do. This reality makes Watoto's song, "Warning," that much more compelling given the context and the climate of the time. The image of these girls hundreds of miles away recognizing and speaking to the humanity of a fallen brother, a victim of America's racist ideology and entrenched, racist practice(s), is encouraging, and not just for people like Natur. Additionally, Watoto has been consistent in its appeals for unity and peace within the Black community. After the death of Tyriece "Lor Scoota" Watson in June 2016, Watoto posted a video of a song they released in 2014 titled, "Unify and Live." The song is recorded over the track to Bonnie Tyler's 1983 hit, "Total Eclipse of the Heart," and the video begins with statistics on homicides committed in Black communities by Black people at the time

of its release. Watoto's post provided with the link for the video reads, "Watoto From the Nile has been fighting to stop the violence, rest in peace Lor Scoota, we dont think your death will be in vein, your about to bring the community together, please listen to the words and share this video."³⁵² Watson, a Baltimore born and based rapper on the rise, was brutally gunned down as he was nearing what may have been his prime. His murder occurred even after he made public pleas for unity and for young, Black people in Baltimore to stop the violence and come together for peace. In fact, Watson, a recognized up-and-coming talent in the rap game, was cut down driving away from a peace rally; he was 23 years old.

Regardless of Watson's talent, his fate was no different from other young, Black men in his community, and this is the painful, brutal reality of Black life in many parts of America. A Black person's economic or social status does not preclude him or her from a premature death at the hands of the state, a white lynch mob, or his/her peers. Being respected, well-liked, and/or economically more secure than most, will not prevent a Black person from feeling the long arm of the law, the cold steel of a pistol to the head, or the shock of a bullet to the chest. Sometimes, these things happen simultaneously and occur time and time again. Even so, Watoto could hearken back to its own work to challenge a gospel of violence in their community while simultaneously affirming Watson's efforts to divert, at least in his actions, from a message focused on the proliferation of drug use, drug money, and an endless cycle of death.

³⁵² Watoto from the Nile, "Watoto from the Nile has been fighting to stop the violence," Facebook, June 26, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/WatotoFromTheNile/videos/1162037017193628/>

Watson's contemporaries, whom I consider to include the members of Watoto, are all too familiar with the news stories about young people gunned down or stabbed, not even in the prime of their lives; some Black children are gone before they reach the age of 10, let alone the "ripe old age" of 25. Since 2015, the year of the rebellion in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death, over 1,000 people were the victims of homicide in the city of Baltimore.³⁵³ Additionally, since 2015, the majority of those murdered were Black males younger than the age of 35 (63.3%).³⁵⁴ As of November 14, 2017, there was an average of almost one murder a day in Baltimore, and the city exceeded the total number of homicides recorded for 2016 with a total of 343.³⁵⁵ When adjusted for population, the total number of homicides in 2017 is the most per capita in Baltimore's history (55.8 killings per 100,000).³⁵⁶

Furthermore, there is now a nationally recognized opioid crisis in America, yet Baltimore has been in a state of crisis for decades in the wake of the crack epidemic. What is different is that the resources that are being marshaled to address the current opioid crisis looks different from those deployed to address the crack epidemic in many cities impacted by its propagation. In Maryland between 2007 and 2016, the number of drug-related intoxication deaths increased by 300% for heroin, 87% for cocaine, 38% for prescription opioids, and 4300% for fentanyl, and the

³⁵³ "Baltimore Homicides," *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD: The Baltimore Sun, n.d.), <http://data.baltimoresun.com/bing-maps/homicides/index.php>.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Two weekend cease fires in the city may have slowed the pace of homicides committed as 2017 came to a close.

³⁵⁶ Kevin Rector, "Baltimore Has Now Had 343 Homicides in 2017, Sets Record for Killings Per Capita," *The Baltimore Sun*, December 27, 2017, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/crime/bs-md-ci-per-capita-homicides-20171227-story.html>.

epidemic overwhelmingly impacts whites and males in all reported categories.³⁵⁷

President Donald Trump declared the current opioid epidemic “the worse drug crisis in American history.”³⁵⁸ Additionally, Trump highlighted the epidemic’s complexity and the (tremendous) effort it will take to address the crisis:

Addressing it will require all of our effort, and it will require us to confront the crisis in all of its very real complexity...As Americans, we cannot allow this to continue...It is time to liberate our communities from the scourge of drug addiction. We can be the generation that ends the opioid epidemic. We can do it.³⁵⁹

Jenna Johnson and John Wagner highlight that Leana Wen, Baltimore’s commissioner, was happy that Trump’s announcement has given much needed exposure to the crisis, but Wen also asserted the same financial relief that is provided to victims in the wake of hurricanes and other natural disasters should be utilized to stop other epidemics, like opioid addiction.³⁶⁰ Moreover, Wen stresses that other health priorities shouldn’t be sacrificed while addressing this crisis.

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (H.R. 5484) furthered strengthened the war on drugs by criminalizing not just the sale of narcotics but the possession of them. Subtitle B of the Drug Possession Penalty Act of 1986, “establish[ed] criminal

³⁵⁷ Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, “Drug- and Alcohol-Related Intoxication Deaths in Maryland, 2016,” 2017, https://bha.health.maryland.gov/OVERDOSE_PREVENTION/Documents/Maryland_2016_Overdose_Annual_report.pdf. See Fig. 5 on page 12, 8-36.

³⁵⁸ Jenna Johnson and John Wagner, “Trump Declares the Opioid Crisis a Public Health Emergency,” *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/10/26/trump-plans-to-declare-the-opioid-crisis-a-public-health-emergency/?utm_term=.1c9adac568d9.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁰ Jenna Johnson and John Wagner, “Trump Declares the Opioid Crisis a Public Health Emergency,” *The Washington Post*.

penalties for simple possession of a controlled substance.”³⁶¹ Substance abusers were labeled “junkies,” “baseheads,” and criminals who were not worthy of the financial resources of the state to be used for anything other than surveillance, harassment, and incarceration. The Justice Policy Institute’s 2010 report on jailing in Baltimore notes that most people in jail at the time of publication were charged with nonviolent and drug offenses.³⁶² Presently, substance abusers most impacted by the opioid epidemic are considered victims of money hungry drug companies, unscrupulous doctors, and the operators of pill mills across America, not just the “shady” heroin dealer. Gone are the references to junkies and baseheads; they have been replaced with that of “victim,” and “loved ones” (e.g. son, daughter, brother, sister, father, mother), “disease,” and “mental health challenges.” Rehabilitation (voluntary or involuntary), drug and psychological counseling, and the like are the current go-to solutions for the current crisis, and many people have called for a massive commitment of monetary resources to fight this epidemic in earnest. What has changed? The face of the epidemic is what has changed. The image of a hoodied Black or brown person with track marks on his or her arm has been replaced by the marred appearance of a young or middle-aged white person whose once rosy-cheeked visage and healthy, milky white body has been ravaged by drug addiction. Dahleen Glanton poignantly highlights the differences between the opioid epidemic and the crack epidemic:

³⁶¹“Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986,” Pub. L. No. 100 Stat. 3207, 193 (1986), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/5484>.

³⁶² Nastassia Walsh, “Baltimore Behind Bars: How to Reduce the Jail Population, Save Money and Improve Public Safety,” 2010, http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/10-06_rep_baltbehindbars_md-ps-ac-rd.pdf, 15-16.

“White suburbanites are lobbying their state officials to help them solve a problem that is ruining young people’s lives. They are holding rallies on statehouse lawns, urging elected officials to treat their addicted children with dignity—something that young people addicted to crack never received.”³⁶³

However, the young people of Baltimore have been impacted by an ongoing epidemic of drug addiction, drug-related violence, and crackdowns brought about by the state to address Black people’s drug-related issues and challenges as purely criminal, rather than health-related. The American Civil Liberties Union’s 2006 report “Cracks in the System: Twenty Years of the Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Law” notes that the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 mandated for the first time minimum sentences for possession and/or distribution based on specific quantities of cocaine. Additionally, the law mandated tougher punishment for offenses involving crack (cocaine in rock form) than cocaine in powder form.³⁶⁴ This difference in sentencing mandates led to a disparity in how whites and Blacks were treated for similar crimes, with white and more affluent Americans opting for cocaine in powder form which tended to be more expensive, as opposed to poor Americans opting for less expensive options like crack, many of whom were African Americans.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ Dahleen Glanton, “Race, the Crack Epidemic and the Effect on Today’s Opioid Crisis,” *The Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/glanton/ct-opioid-epidemic-dahleen-glanton-met-20170815-column.html>.

³⁶⁴ Deborah J. Vagins and Jesselyn McCurdy, “Cracks in the System: Twenty Years of the Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Law” (Washington, D.C./New York, 2006), https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/cracksinsystem_20061025.pdf, i.

³⁶⁵ Deborah J. Vagins and Jesselyn McCurdy, “Cracks in the System: Twenty Years of the Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Law,” i.

Implementation of the law and related policies resulted in disproportionate sentencing that disrupted Black families. At the time of the release of its report, the ACLU emphasized that African Americans comprised “15% of drug users (roughly their percentage of the general population), represented 37% of all those arrested for drug violations, 59% of those convicted, and 74% of those sent to prison for a drug offense.” Additionally, though 66% percent of crack users were white or Hispanic at the time of the report, 80% of defendants sentenced for crack-related offenses were African American.³⁶⁶ Moreover, after the implementation of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, the average federal drug sentences for African Americans went from 11% higher than that of whites to 49% higher.³⁶⁷

It is also important to note here that poverty is and has been considered by activists, educators, and public health administrators to be a matter of public concern as it impacts everything from health outcomes and education attainment to mortality rates. In 2016, Maryland’s Department of Legislative Services produced a report titled, “History, Public Policy, and the Geography of Poverty: Understanding Challenges Facing Baltimore City and Maryland.” In it, DLS provided important information that underscores how entrenched poverty is in the city of Baltimore, along with its impact on residents, of whom most are Black. Outlined below are headings taken from the report:

- Baltimore City Poverty More Persistent and Concentrated than In the Rest of Maryland
- Unlike in the Rest of the State, Incomes Have Not Grown in Baltimore City

³⁶⁶ Vagins, Deborah J., “Cracks in the System: Twenty Years of the Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Law.”

³⁶⁷ Ibid, i-ii.

- Total Employment in Baltimore City Has Declined and There Has Been a Significant Change in the Mix of Jobs
- City's Overall Poverty Rate Has Changed Little, But Poverty Rates Vary Significantly by Race/Ethnicity and There Have Been Shifts in the Distribution of Poverty within the City
- Employment and Other Challenges More Difficult for Low-income Individuals Living in High-poverty Areas³⁶⁸

Furthermore, the report makes connections to poverty and other findings on its relationship to housing and neighborhoods; jobs and the economy; education; health; children and families; and transportation.³⁶⁹

The link between poverty and incarceration is critical and complicated, along with the reality that there are parents and grandparents in Baltimore whose parents were imprisoned for possession of narcotics throughout the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s. And, the epidemic of mass incarceration is one that has and continues to negatively impact several generations of Black Americans, especially vulnerable young people. Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes that in California, the prison population grew by 500 percent between 1982 and 2000, even though the crime rate declined after 1980. She also highlights that African Americans and Latinos are two-thirds of the prison population, and they are largely “deindustrialized cities’ working or workless poor.”³⁷⁰ More and more Black and brown people are sent to prisons and jails across the country, and Bruce Western et. al. aptly asks if public safety can even be

³⁶⁸ Robert Rehrmann; Heather Ruby; Charity Scott; Stanford Ward Botts, Jennifer; hiram Burch; Jason Kramer, Eric Pierce, “History, Public Policy, and the Geography of Poverty: Understanding Challenges Facing Baltimore City and Maryland” (Annapolis, MD, 2016), <http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/pubs/budgetfiscal/2016-geography-of-poverty.pdf>, 2-5.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, 5-8.

³⁷⁰ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 7.

improved and achieved when our nation implements public policies that deepen social inequality, which is linked to an increase in crime.³⁷¹

Currently, Maryland's Governor's Office for Children (GOC) asserts that roughly 90,000 children have a parent on parole, probation, in jail, or in prison.³⁷² This same office highlights that the diverse impact on children and their families, from emotional disruption to underperformance in school:

The impact of incarceration on children and families includes family instability, higher rates of child welfare involvement, and post-traumatic effects such as hypervigilance, feelings of despair and powerlessness, and poor academic outcomes. The goal of reducing the impact of incarceration requires focusing on proven strategies for improving economic stability and future economic success for the children and families of the incarcerated.³⁷³

Additionally, GOC notes the state of Maryland spends roughly \$300 million each year just incarcerating people from Baltimore, with \$17 million of that amount spent on inmates hailing from the Sandtown-Winchester section of the city,³⁷⁴ which was also the epicenter of Baltimore's 2015 uprising. Moreover, Baltimore City's Health Department affirms that poverty has a tangible impact on health outcomes for people in the city: "With more than 1 in 3 of Baltimore's children living below the federal poverty line and more than 30% of Baltimore households earning less than \$25,000/year, income, poverty, and race have enormous impact on health

³⁷¹ Western, Bruce, Becky Pettit, and Josh Guetzkow;, "Black Economic Progress in the Era of Mass Imprisonment," in *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, ed. Marc and Meda Chesney-Lind Mauer (New York: The New Press, 2002), 180.

³⁷² Maryland Governor's Office for Children, "Children and Families Affected by Incarceration," accessed December 6, 2017, <http://goc.maryland.gov/incarceration/>.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

outcomes.”³⁷⁵ This is not to mention the impact on families and neighborhoods like Sandtown-Winchester that have larger percentages of incarcerated people who are not present to be counted for each census; census data results influence the allocation of resources. These factors have a long-term material impact on Sandtown-Winchester and other neighborhoods like it in Baltimore.

Lastly, the fight to promote access to healthy food and consumption is ongoing within the city, where food deserts are the norm. As of 2015, the Maryland Food System Map sponsored by The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) and several Baltimore City municipal offices, defined a food desert in Baltimore City as “an area where: 1) The distance to a supermarket or supermarket alternative is more than ¼ mile; 2) The median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level; 3) Over 30% of households have no vehicle available; and 4) The average Healthy Food Availability Index score for all food stores is low.”³⁷⁶ CLF and the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative outlined in their 2015 report that 25% of people in Baltimore live in a food desert, and this can be seen with the GIS data available in the Maryland Food System Map.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Baltimore City Health Department, “Baltimore City Health Department White Paper: State of Health in Baltimore: Summary of Key Issues, Services and Policies” (Baltimore, MD, 2016), [https://health.baltimorecity.gov/state-health-baltimore-winter-2016#Summary of Key Issues, Services and Policies](https://health.baltimorecity.gov/state-health-baltimore-winter-2016#Summary%20of%20Key%20Issues,%20Services%20and%20Policies), .

³⁷⁶ Johns Hopkins Center for A Livable Future, “Food Deserts 2015,” *Maryland Food System Map*, 2015, https://data-clf.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/246aa49d8b25476b808f7b2e812c19c3_126?selectedAttributes%5B%5D=ID&chartType=bar.

³⁷⁷ Amanda Behrens Buczynski, Holly Freishtat and Sarah Buzogany, “Mapping Baltimore City’s Food Environment: 2015 Report” (Baltimore, MD, 2015), https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/_pdf/research/clf_reports/Baltimore-Food-Environment-Report-2015-1.pdf; Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, “Food Deserts 2015”; “1 in 4

Young, Gifted, and Black in the Belly of Baltimore: Black Youth Subjectivity in the City

“I don’t want anyone to say who Kondwani Fidel is or what they believe I was thinking,” Russell said. “I want y’all to know.”³⁷⁸ –*Kondwani Fidel*

Listen
It’s 2017 and my people still dyin’
Haven’t gotten any better since the Baltimore riots
Police killin’ us off I’m not shocked or so surprises
But tell me who we supposed to call when we are in a crisis
We all fall down, but when we gonna get back up
Though people killin’ us, so killin’ each other that is a no no
Gotta get it together
Can’t stand to see all the sake
Can’t stand to see another shiner so you shoot him in his brain
And that’s when we all fall down
Don’t get along with your family so you don’t come around
As a people, I swear I see so much potential
Can’t afford a cause though I see you drivin’ in a rental
But again times are getting’ hard
Is about how you got there and steps outta the hood
Instead of fightin’
How ‘bout you fight for what’s right
Everybody is star so we all ‘gon shine bright
I’m out³⁷⁹

I started this section with a quote from a young, Black, Baltimore-born and raised writer who goes by the name of Kondwani Fidel. His viral, self-published essay, “How A Young Boy Has Been Decaying in Baltimore Since Age 10: A Death

Baltimore Residents Live in a Food Desert,” *Center for a Livable Future*, 2015, <https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/news-room/News-Releases/2015/1-In-4-Baltimore-Residents-Live-Food-Desert.html>.

³⁷⁸ Brittany Britto, “Kondwani Fidel Opens up about His Viral Essay and Giving A Voice to Black Experiences in Baltimore,” *The Baltimore Sun*, September 1, 2017, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/features/baltimore-insider-blog/bs-fe-kondwani-fidel-20170825-story.html>.

³⁷⁹ Fidel, “How A Young Boy Has Been Decaying in Baltimore.”

Note,” is a poignant account of friendship, kinship, death, grief, and coping with life in Baltimore. Arguably, what is most compelling about his description is that it is his, written and presented by him as well as unfiltered. From Fidel’s description of his brother’s burned body, blistered and singed by a devastating house fire, to his stories of learning of the deaths of his beloved friends and family members, we see him paint a bloody and tear-stained picture of what life has been like for him and his community of friends and family. Additionally, pictures of Fidel are dotted throughout his essay; some are of himself, others of family members as little ones, smiling and full of life. Those photos are the other side to the tales of homicide and death that he is compelled to tell, coupled with the emotional aftermath he must deal with every time anyone is lost to violence in Baltimore.

If the sounds of gunshots were generated into song sales, Baltimore would’ve gone triple platinum by now. Murder has been opening its mouth like a hungry lion, eating away more than 220 lives in 2017, and it’s only August.

It was 3:00 a.m. and I was laying down on a pint-sized mattress in a cramped dorm room at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I had a long day of writing workshops, so I decided to hit up the The Violet Hour, a bar in Wicker Park, where I guzzled 4 vodka gimlets to end my late-night/early-morning. I was plastered, numb to all misery, until my phone buzzed. I checked it, and an alert read, ‘Man killed in Greenmount Avenue shooting becomes city’s 200th homicide victim.’ I stared at the ceiling as cold tears slid down my cheek, chilling the back of my neck. I started to reminisce about all of my family and friends who expired on the streets of Baltimore. Depression crept down on me, hope seemed futile, and I wanted to fade out like Robin Williams. I called on God, but his phone was on do not disturb; it seems as though he always ignores me when I need him the most. Every time a body drops in my city, no matter if it’s a loved one or not, a piece of my sanity is chipped away.

We live in country that marks black babies at a popular price of null and void.

Rest in peace to all of the children who were born—a bullet wound, a bad day, a bloody skull, a body bag.

As long as guns thunderclap, striking holes through flesh; so long live the lost black angels, and the ones who are next. I hope that this song serenades forever.³⁸⁰

The last image of his essay is what closes it: it is a picture of three Black children, one girl and two boys, looking up. One of the boys is sitting down on a chair, shirtless with a hand over his eyes; the girl, clad in a tank top, plaid shorts, braids, and hair baubles, is standing by his side looking straight out and up; the other boy is standing next to the girl, and he is positioned right behind the chair pointing a small, white rod of some kind, also looking out and up. Fidel is credited for taking the photo, and its title reads, “Shoot for the stars.”³⁸¹ The image captures the season, summer in Baltimore, which can be particularly deadly, but it also captures that creative potential embedded within these children. They all may not make it to see 24 like Fidel, but they can all shoot for the stars—or at each other and anywhere in between.

The next quote that begins this section of the chapter are the lyrics from a solo rap performed by one of the girls of Watoto. She raps over the hook and music to the 2004 hit “All Falls Down” by Kanye West featuring Syleena Johnson, which is also taken from the hook of Lauryn Hill’s 2002 song, “Mystery of Iniquity”; the selection of the hook is timely given the materialism to which both West’s and Hill’s songs overtly allude.³⁸² Posted on YouTube on February 5, 2017, this Watoto member raps

³⁸⁰ Fidel, “How A Young Boy Has Been Decaying in Baltimore.”. Emphasis is the author’s.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² West’s song catalogues the commercialism that plagues him and his peers, and declares that even if you drive a Mercedes Benz you’re “still a nigga in a coupe/coop.” His overt references to the elusive freedom in an industry, a country, that profits off of Black people is front and center. Moreover, Stacy Dash is featured prominently in the video for this song, along with West. Arguably, both of them have famously been in freefalls of some kind: West’s deteriorating mental health and

about the continued killing in Baltimore, both by the state through the arm of the police and by Black people themselves. She calls out those who “can’t afford a cause” but can afford to drive a rental, and she alerts us to the fact that people are still dying in Baltimore, though it is only a little over a month into 2017 at the time of the video’s posting.³⁸³ She does not turn away from the violence, but highlights those involved and some of what can be done to address what is. She makes a challenge for people to stop fighting each other and to fight for what is right. The pain and frustration are palpable, but they are coupled with hope, and the strident and verdant belief in something greater embedded within the (latent) potential of her people. It is there, even if obscured by the brutal violence many experience in the city, and she beckons it, calls to it, in an effort to awaken it in her people.

Korryn Gaines, 23 at the time of her death on August 1, 2016, posted video and reflections about her siege with Baltimore County, Maryland police and SWAT teams on several social media platforms. Her deadly encounter with law enforcement and her chronicling of that confrontation in real time came a little less than a month after Philando Castile was shot and killed during a traffic stop while his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, livestreamed his death on Facebook.³⁸⁴ Both Gaines and Castile legally exercised their second amendment rights to own firearms, and both had interactions with law enforcement over traffic violations. In Gaines’s case, Baltimore

Dash’s public campaign to embrace and champion conservative values that often undermine communities of color.

³⁸³ Watoto from the Nile, “Listen!!!,” YouTube, February 5, 2017, <https://youtu.be/0MvhI-Zr9GY>.

³⁸⁴ Castile’s deadly encounter was with Jeronimo Yanez, the Minnesota police officer acquitted of Castile’s murder in 2017.

County police came to her home with a warrant to arrest her for failing to appear in court for a traffic stop in March of 2016. They also had a warrant to arrest her fiancé, Kareem Courtney, “for a domestic assault charge based on allegations filed by Gaines.”³⁸⁵

Gaines used her phone to serve as means for others to witness her ordeal. Streaming and posting content to Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat gave her an outlet to the world, and she was also able to keep in touch with friends and family through text messages and FaceTime.³⁸⁶ Even so, her case also highlights the unprecedented response by law enforcement to submit requests to Facebook and Instagram for her social media accounts on those platforms be disabled/deactivated, “believing social media was distracting her from negotiations with police.”³⁸⁷ Gaines’s last post on Instagram shows her asking her five-year old son, Kodi, what was going on at the time and what he wanted to do in response to their ordeal. Kodi replies that the police were trying to kill them and he struggles with responding to his mother about what he wants to do (next).³⁸⁸ You can also hear what sounds like the

³⁸⁵ Alison Knezevich and Kevin Rector, “Investigative Files Provide New Insights into Korryn Gaines’ 6-Hour Standoff with Baltimore County Police,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 5, 2016, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/investigations/bs-md-co-korryn-gaines-timeline-20161103-story.html>.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁷ Alison Knezevich and Kevin Rector, “Investigative Files Provide New Insights into Korryn Gaines’ 6-Hour Standoff with Baltimore County Police,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 5, 2016.

³⁸⁸ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), “My son is not a hostage,” Instagram photo, August 1, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BIktcsVgxyy/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>

police in the background asking about Gaines's phone, to which she responds, "it's charging."³⁸⁹

Digital video retrieved by reporters at The Baltimore Sun through a public records request catalogue Gaines's stance and reflections on what was happening with law enforcement when they (initially) attempted to enter her home:

Korryn Gaines stared into her cellphone camera. 'This is for anybody who wanna know what I'm doing,' she said, panning down to a shotgun perched in her lap. She turned the camera toward her pajama-footed 5-year-old son, who smiled and waved. Then back to herself. 'I'm m— f— tired, but the devil at my door, and he's refusing to leave,' said Gaines, 23, with a cartoon blanket wrapped around her shoulders. 'I'm at peace. I'm in my home. I ain't trying to hurt nobody. ... They been quiet a while so they plotting to come in here and disturb the peace. ... I am not a criminal.'³⁹⁰

A myriad of documents and photos, digital content from Gaines's mobile phone, officer testimony, and police radio conversations were used to determine that Gaines's fatal shooting and her son's wounding at the hands of police were legally justified.³⁹¹ However, her son, now six, but five years old at the time of their encounter, was injured during the standoff, and is currently involved in a lawsuit being brought against the Baltimore County police department on his behalf.

Gaines did not have to die during this encounter. It is critical that we consider her case in light of what we know about Cliven Bundy, a cattle rancher from Nevada. Dissimilar in terms of their identities, Gaines a 23-year old, Black woman from metro Baltimore now deceased, and Bundy, a 71-year-old white man from Nevada, incarcerated but very much alive, shared their distrust of the state and both stood their

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Alison Knezevich and Kevin Rector, "Investigative Files Provide New Insights into Korryn Gaines' 6-Hour Standoff with Baltimore County Police."

³⁹¹ Ibid.

ground in the face of confrontation with law enforcement. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) enforced grazing policies and fees on Bundy (and other ranchers) who grazed their cattle on public lands. Bundy consistently asserts that the public lands upon which his cattle graze are not owned by the federal government, but by the state of Nevada. In short, he and his supporters assert that states' rights should supersede that of the federal government, especially in light of their contention that the federal government never had legitimate claims to the public lands in dispute.³⁹² There were several standoffs and clashes between BLM and Bundy's camps over their cattle thousands upon thousands of dollars in fees owed to the government for grazing on public lands. As of April 10, 2014, a "protest camp" formed with Bundy supporters who were not afraid to engage BLM agents with force if they found it necessary to protect Bundy's cattle and right to graze them on lands they believed were rightfully the property of the state of Nevada.³⁹³ The protestors, some armed, also strategized about how to draw attention to what they perceived as government aggression on multiple fronts:

One protestor, a former Arizona sheriff named Richard Mack, told Fox News about the militia's plans if violence broke out in Bunkerville. 'We were actually strategizing to put all the women up at the front. If they are going to

³⁹² Jaime Fuller, "The Long Fight between the Bundys and the Federal Government, from 1989 to Today," *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/04/15/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-long-fight-between-cliven-bundy-and-the-federal-government/?utm_term=.329b8a7d19c4; Matt Ford, "The Irony of Cliven Bundy's Unconstitutional Stand," *The Atlantic*, April 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/04/the-irony-of-cliven-bundys-unconstitutional-stand/360587/>.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

start shooting, it's going to be women that are going to be televised all across the world getting shot by these rogue federal officers."³⁹⁴

On April 12, 2014, Jaime Fuller notes that the BLM decided not to enforce their court order stating, "Based on information about conditions on the ground, and in consultation with law enforcement, we have made a decision to conclude the cattle gather because of our serious concern about the safety of employees and members of the public."³⁹⁵ Federal agents of the state backed down in an effort not to return to the fatal aftermaths of Waco, Texas and Ruby Ridge, Idaho.³⁹⁶ To that end, white death was unpalatable in Bundy's case, and therefore unacceptable in the aforesaid showdown between the federal government, Bundy, and his militia supporters. All in all, they were able to stand their ground and live. Additionally, Bundy has since been acquitted of all charges.

However, in Gaines's case, Black death was not only recognized as the justified response, she predicted her death at the hands of the police months earlier during her traffic stop, an encounter that escalated to the point where she was arrested for "disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and other charges."³⁹⁷ An officer says in a video of that traffic-related encounter with Gaines, "I'm not going to murder you, I promise you that" to which Gaines replies, "Oh OK, well one of you will...One of

³⁹⁴ Fuller, "The Long Fight between the Bundys and the Federal Government, from 1989 to Today."

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ford, "The Irony of Cliven Bundy's Unconstitutional Stand."

³⁹⁷ Alison Knezevich and Kevin Rector, "Investigative Files Provide New Insights into Korryn Gaines' 6-Hour Standoff with Baltimore County Police."

you will. I promise you, you will.”³⁹⁸ She later remarked in response to an officer outside her door the day she was murdered that, “I don’t need anybody to hurt me, either,” Gaines said. Police, she said, could never convince her that ‘50 guns surrounding my home’ were necessary.”³⁹⁹ Arguably, Gaines’s situation stood in stark contrast to that of Bundy only in its outcome. Gaines’s death was justified in the eyes of the law; Bundy’s standoff and subsequent acquittal was also justified in the eyes of law, though, in the latter case, Bundy made an aggressive stand and threats on land he did not legally rent or own.

Gaines has been praised by some but also criticized on social media by many others. She has been accused of using her son as a “meat shield” (i.e. human shield), though Gaines opposed that assertion in the video she took during her siege wherein she declared that her son was not a hostage. In contrast, a Bundy supporter admitted to a plan that included placing women on the front lines (to be martyrs) for their cause. Gaines’s family reported that she had a recent history of mental illness, and was not taking her medication regularly. Moreover, they reported that she was anxious about how to manage the money she was awarded due to her exposure to lead at a young age. Her anxiety was arguably fueled by her changing mental health, yet, here we also see that Gaines saw the writing on the wall in regards to the potential outcome for any encounter with law enforcement. After her traffic stop in March of 2016, she posted about Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old Black woman who died in police

³⁹⁸ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), “It was definitely a murder this day, definitely,” Instagram video, March 16, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BDB__E7Medq/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty

³⁹⁹ Alison Knezevich and Kevin Rector, “Investigative Files Provide New Insights into Korryn Gaines’ 6-Hour Standoff with Baltimore County Police.”

custody after a traffic stop in Texas. During the encounter, the police used Gaines's mother's mobile phone to communicate with her, but they did so posing as her mother, not as the police. Her mother remarked that Gaines knew it was not her because the things that the police texted to her were not how she would communicate them to her daughter. Additionally, she noted that her daughter was not informed that her extended family members were at a church only a few blocks away; they mentioned that she was isolated and felt that she had few options in her situation. According to Knezevich and Rector, the evidence available in consideration of Gaines's death evokes more questions than they answer.

What is gripping about Gaines's life apart from her brutal death, is her public stance on her identity and the culture in which she enrobed herself and her immediate family. Proudly African-centered, she denounced white oppressive culture that sought to deny her confidence, power, and regality as a woman of African descent. Many of her posts on Instagram refer to herself and/or her peers as queens and kings, respectively. There are also many calls to cease celebrating national American holidays that mark the oppression of Black people (among others), and a desire for people to stop "coonin'" and wake up. Gaines makes several references to ancestors (including one about Sandra Bland in a posted image), and educates an Instagram follower about how (Black) ancestors don't die, at least in the spiritual sense. The day after Muhammad Ali's death, Gaines had an exchange with someone on Instagram who submitted a response to a photo she posted of Muhammad Ali with (presumably) one of his children and Malcolm X with two of his children. The commenter, @smash49s, lamented, "it's sad that all of our greats are dying out and we don't have

anyone to replace them.”⁴⁰⁰ Gaines responded, “we don’t die,” and “We are ALL GREAT my friend. A fire like us just keeps burning nd [sic] getting better with travel.”⁴⁰¹ Arguably, Gaines saw greatness within herself, and in other Black people, and the potential that would only be realized when free from the constraints of western thinking:

I just wanna say yes, I was put into the school system, but I also came out of school a fool. It wasn’t until I rejected that system when I found the truth. So if u ever ask me ill tell u. I didn’t reach my full potential until I got out of that box, so fater 18 years of being taught NOT to sue Common Sense, all I can say is that im blessed to have repaired my brain after all the torture. Nd my children are lucky to have a mother who care for their well BEING more than she cares for the system set against them. Whats mines is mines nd I will never ask them or FORCE them to participate in their own brain damage, or to become a corporate law abiding citizen. We do not submit to the devil or contribute to his plans by any means. Nd while the devil is at work please kno that God is always 10 steps ahead.⁴⁰²

Promoting consciousness and an understanding of the history of Black people in and before America was also critical to Gaines.

Ask all the children in school how many eyes they have they’ll tell u with confidence that they’re only 2. Why put your child into a system that does not make them aware of their 3rd eye? Better yet why keep it from them in the 1st place. Ohhhh I get it. Don’t tell them about their 3rd eye because then they would be aware nd conscious of the illusion you’re setting up for them. I get it now. #dead⁴⁰³

⁴⁰⁰ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), “Live on,” Instagram photo, June 4, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BGPGTwwseWC/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), “Ijs tho. Life has always been my best teacher,” Instagram image, June 3, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BGMiP89sedK/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>. Emphasis is the author’s.

⁴⁰³ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), “I hate that we let them teach our children bullshit,” Instagram image, June 3, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BGMm4SeseZ3/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>

The third eye she references is what is discussed in African-centered circles dating back to ancient Egyptian religious practice. Also, educating her (Black) peers about what she saw as their true nature (i.e. gods, all) was paramount. At least one of her posts declared that she was her own religion, and that we (Black people) are not born sinners but are born inherently divine as gods. Her stance was also inherently stalwart in its approach towards standing one's ground and not yielding to the oppressive culture in which Black people in America find themselves. One of her Instagram posts asks those who use(d) the hashtag, #StopKillingUs, recognized by some as a call for an end to police brutality against Black people, to stop using it:

"#StopKillingUs is some begging ass shit. Please chill."⁴⁰⁴ Gaines specifically admonishes the hashtag as "weak [a]nd under the illusion of Fear."⁴⁰⁵ This paired with her own decision to legally purchase a firearm is a stance that hearkens back to not only the Black Panthers of old but to all those (past and present) who implored Black people to exercise their second amendment rights. One of her posts called the Black Guns Matter event, "Solutionary License to Carry Drive" "better than church on a Sunday..."⁴⁰⁶

Our black children are born Menaces to Society..no matter how much schooling and discipline they have, their melanated skin will always make them an automatic threat to the system we are trapped in. Raising them to be submissive just makes them easy kills and easy slaves. But the power that runs

⁴⁰⁴ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), "Weak nd under the illusion of Fear," Instagram image, July 13, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHzYFiJgeBU/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), "Don't know who was responsible, but this right here is better than church on a Sunday," Instagram image, May 31, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BGFCsVRsee7/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>. More information on the Black Guns Matter organization is available here: <http://officialblackgunsmatter.com/>

thru them can be used to fight back. Re-mind them of what the system wants them to ignore and abandon. Knowledge is power and with their RIGHT minds they control reality. Ijs.⁴⁰⁷

Gaines was known to people in Watoto's circle, a young person who was devoted to a certain type of decolonization of the mind. There is another quote that may potentially speak to the presence of mental illness and mental health challenges, especially considering the stress of her encounters with law enforcement and the repercussions of her toxic exposure to lead while young. Yet, even with those challenges and her potential awareness of them, she asserted that which she knew for sure regarding white supremacy and the oppression that Black people have endured and resist in America: "My mom did not raise a fool. Maybe a psycho but not a fool lmao."⁴⁰⁸ However, it is important to consider that these potentialities are not mutually exclusive. Gaines could have struggled with profound mental health challenges while simultaneously maintaining an acute awareness and consciousness about the racist culture in which she, her family, and her peers lived.

In her death, people have called Gaines a psychopath, insane, a queen, a martyr, and so many other names there is not enough room or time to recount them here. However, one thing that is arguably not in dispute is her track record of controlling her own narrative, and serving as a champion for a standpoint that is far from mainstream, but is in conversation with the legacy of Black thought and social

⁴⁰⁷ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), "Notes," Instagram image, March 17, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BDEaugaMeaw/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>. Emphasis is the author's.

⁴⁰⁸ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), "□□□□□□□□ why God □," June 19, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BG1Ur3lMeWY/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>

movements in America. She undermines the belief that greatness within the Black community is assigned to a famous few; instead, she motions and signals to the greatness in every Black person, a greatness that she believes will never end. She implored others like her to love life, live life, and to make life worthy of reading about when it is all over:

Love your fucking life. Take pictures of everything. Tell people you love them. Talk to random strangers. Do things that you're scared to do. Fuck it, because so many of us die and no one remembers a thing we did. Take your life and make it the best story in the world. Don't waste that shit.⁴⁰⁹

Gaines did that, and her Black girl/woman subjectivity ended with her paying the ultimate price for living out her beliefs while possibly suffering from mental health challenges.

In 2016, Chino Braxton, now 20, a friend of Tyriece “Lor Scoota” Watson, and a popular dirt bike/motor cross phenom, spoke with Justin Fenton of The Baltimore Sun about how he was feeling in the aftermath of a homicide attempt on his own life as well as the successful attempt in the case of his friend, Scoota. The attempt on Braxton’s own life did not convince him it was time to leave Baltimore; it was the murder of his friend that persuaded him it was time to move on: “I should have really woke up after my situation, but the situation with Scoota really woke me up...I definitely got plans on leaving.”⁴¹⁰ Fenton noted that Braxton was shot while sitting in his vehicle in the Park Heights area of the city. A bullet remains lodged in Braxton’s head; another grazed him. Fortunately, he is still able to earn a living

⁴⁰⁹ Korryn Gaines (@shesyourmajesty), “□□,” Instagram image, June 30, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHSEYELA5FK/?hl=en&taken-by=shesyourmajesty>

⁴¹⁰ Fenton, “Rapper’s Murder Leaves Peers with Bleak Outlook on Baltimore.”

participating in dirt bike/motor cross exhibitions, and at the time of Fenton’s article, Braxton was due to star in a film about dirt bike culture with Philadelphia-based rapper and business associate, Meek Mill; the film was to be produced by Jada Pinkett Smith, another Baltimore native.⁴¹¹

Fenton notes that Braxton has no idea why he was shot, why someone would shoot him, and Fenton remarks, “police know of no motive, and the case is unsolved.”⁴¹² Braxton reflects on what happened to him as well:

I’m never in the streets, never beefing with anybody. . . I felt like everybody from Baltimore loved me, so I just really didn’t get where it came from. I never thought somebody would want to do that to me. I just feel blessed and feel like I’m on earth for a reason—a purpose for me being here.⁴¹³

Yet, a little less than a week and a half after Braxton was featured in Fenton’s article, his brother (Scoota’s manager), Trayvon “Truz” Lee, was gunned down outside of his Druid Hill home.⁴¹⁴ Braxton pours out his heart on Instagram next to a photo of him and Lee, asking how he will tell his nephew (Lee’s son) he is gone, while giving a quick account of their parental support growing up, as well as the tragedies he and his brother endured in 2016:

At the end off the day we men bro an I learned a lot from u . . . All I wanna kno is Wat Ima tell my nephew who has became my son now I have a kid now I gotta be his father because you would do the same for my son an I already treated him like a som I never had . . . You not gone in my eyes you went on a vacation Ima celebrate you life forever . . . We got a strong mom our dads didn’t raise us they were in an out of jail our mom come from the streets she

⁴¹¹ Fenton, “Rapper’s Murder Leaves Peers with Bleak Outlook on Baltimore.” Meek Mill was released from prison on bail in April of 2018.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Tim Prudente and Wyatt Massey, “Rapper Lor Scoota’s Manager Killed Near Baltimore’s Druid Hill Park,” *The Baltimore Sun*, July 7, 2016, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/crime/bs-md-ci-fatal-shooting-20160706-story.html>.

who we learned from . . . An that's a fact bro I went through so much this year it's crazy I was shot in my head 2times one grazed me one still in my skull an u were the one there bro u ain't miss a day I sat my in that hotel after I got shot then we lose ya artist @scootaupnext witch was tragic an u played a big part in laying him to rest . . . Then a week later we lost you a great dad who put his son first the city I did so much for an put it all behind had betrayed me bro they took you an person away who means so much to me my brother . . . Have a great time on that jet bro when u get there send me pics you will forever live on I gotta take these woman that depend on me to another place I dnt do it for my city & fam nomore . . . I do it for my fam I love you bro an i will introduce Truz to so many great people an make sure he have a great life for you . . . God bless my family ! LongLiveTruz♥⁴¹⁵

Prudente and Wyatt's article quotes Braxton's remarks (also provided above) about the pain he has felt in and from the city of Baltimore: "The city I did so much for an put it all behind had betrayed me bro... They took you an person away who means so much to me my brother."⁴¹⁶ They also remind readers that Braxton was not only shot just five months earlier, but his attempted murder occurred on the same block where his brother was killed. Moreover, they highlight Braxton's own social media post about the impact on another member of his family and the thread of brutal violence that connects them: "My lil sister was standing in the door when I got shot'... She was standing in the door when her other brother loss his life."⁴¹⁷

Looking at Braxton's Instagram history, we see that it is filled with images of a brotherhood of young, Black men living lives as recording artists, or riding dirt bikes, ATVs,⁴¹⁸ and motorcycles with front wheels brazenly pointed up, taking trips

⁴¹⁵ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "At the end off the day we men bro an I learned a lot from u," Instagram photo, July 7, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BHjTM-gBy-M/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ ⁴¹⁷ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "At the end off the day we men bro an I learned a lot from u," Instagram photo, July 7, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BHjTM-gBy-M/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

⁴¹⁸ All-terrain vehicles.

abroad for business and pleasure, and executing deals for their brands. And along with countless images of sneakers,⁴¹⁹ promotional flyers for events hosted by the Dream Chasers crew that signed him, friends with their middle fingers to the sky, and glittery photos of dangly gold and diamond-laced chains and watches, we also see Braxton's reflections on keeping his ties to Baltimore while simultaneously having to move on and away. Clearly tethered to his family and friends, he has taken on the responsibility of looking after his deceased brother's young son and the women in his family. Braxton is also committed to keeping the memory of his brother alive, seemingly for himself and for his son/nephew. Many of his posts on social media showcase not only his grief, but love for his brother and a dedication to keeping him abreast of the ways that he is living his life and looking after the son his brother was forced to leave behind.

Braxton's posts also provide a window for us to see how he communicates memories about his brother to his son/nephew and encourages this child in his charge to live the best life. One such example is Braxton's post about his son/nephew's first day of school in late August of 2016, a little less than two months after the little boy's father (Braxton's brother) was murdered. He posted a photo of his nephew/son on Instagram and encouraged him to "Make ya dad proud today on ya first day of school."⁴²⁰ Braxton also expressed his love for his son/nephew and apologized that he

⁴¹⁹ Braxton advertises for Shoe City, a retail chain with stores throughout Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

⁴²⁰ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "Make ya dad proud today on ya first day of school," Instagram photo, August 29, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BJs1vhIBTc9/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

could not be there with him that day.⁴²¹ Here, we see an acknowledgement of such a momentous occasion, one where parents and other family members accompany their growing little ones to mark the beginning of this new phase in their upbringing and development. It is one he wanted to commemorate not only with his close family, but with the world.

Braxton chronicles his experiences, emotions, and beliefs throughout his posts, offering a cross section of that which matters dearly to him, almost on a daily basis. Even with Braxton's decision to move out of Baltimore, we continue to see him grappling with the city he loves and its enduring challenges. He posts information about Baltimore's homicide rate and the carnage that plagues so many Black communities in the city. Yet, he offers opportunities for others to consider a different reality, and among his posts are those about pursuing one's passion, love, and the (limitless) space for others to thrive: "Know that there is enough for all of us—enough money, enough opportunity, enough love for all of us to be happy."⁴²² And joy is present throughout his timeline—the joy of dirt bike/ATV riding, of fellowshiping with friends, and of enjoying life and the fruits of his labor even though it is consistently touched by the darkness of death. Examples abound from a post about him visiting one of the famed Sprinkles cupcake ATMs in Beverly Hills to spending time in Dubai and the Bahamas, which he refers to as his second home.⁴²³ In

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "Know that there is enough for all of us," Instagram image, January 17, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BPYP32tIHZm/?hl=en>.

⁴²³ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "Had to pull up at that #ATM," Instagram photo, August 3, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BIqyZp2BCgV/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg; Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "We out...Bahamas I will be back

other instances he posts inspirational quotes by authors like Henry David Thoreau and pictures of the brother he misses deeply and his son/nephew who is often seen smiling. Pictures of his brother (and his son/nephew) fill his Instagram account, including photos of him sitting at his brother's grave, flowers adorning the ground-level plaque that bears his sibling's given name and nickname. He does not let us forget how much he loves his son/nephew, referring to him as his heart on more than one occasion. Braxton, like Natur, refers to this little Black boy as a young king—someone who he wants to truly live and thrive in life.⁴²⁴ Taking up the mantle of encouraging other members of his family, he also extols the many accomplishments of his younger sister.⁴²⁵ In fact, he highlights a picture of her speaking publicly and catalogues some of her endeavors, specifically noting she is an A-B (grade) student, a model, actress, and soccer player; he ends his post by calling her “a star in the making,” and stating “I love you.”⁴²⁶

At 20, Braxton cannot believe the life he has lived, especially given that he almost didn't live to see the current year. Five months after his brother's death he posted, “I'll give up everything to have you back bra.”⁴²⁷ To Braxton, all the money,

very soon !,” Instagram video, October 4, 2016,

https://www.instagram.com/p/BLJY_zRhk6z/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg

⁴²⁴ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), “Happy Bday Young Kings...,” Instagram photo, December 14, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BOALJa5hoMi/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

⁴²⁵ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), “Very proud of my lil sister,” Instagram photo, December 20, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BN2LuHTB4O3/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

⁴²⁶ Braxton, “Very proud of my lil sister.”

⁴²⁷ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), “I'll give up everything to have you back bra,” Instagram photo, December 28, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BOjOis9hmdJ/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

women, trips to exotic locales, and top-shelf alcohol pale in comparison to the value of the lives lost. He is not afraid to post content that can be controversial socially. His picture of two trucker-style hats with American flags crossed out in what looks to be red spray paint provoke(d) conversation from people who were upset about his perceived disrespect for this country and veterans.⁴²⁸ It incited response calls for him to go back to where he came from, as well as support for Donald Trump (#TrumpTrain 2016) and the Ku Klux Klan (#kkk).⁴²⁹ Yet Braxton scatters other posts about his support of causes and phenomena that matter to him, like Black Lives Matter, Colin Kaepernick's protests during his time in the National Football League (NFL), and his concerns about how Black Americans use luxury items to add value to their lives when they feel worthless.⁴³⁰ He also weaves posts about his nephew/son's upbringing and the joys of watching him grow up and experience different things in life that appear far from the violence that touches the people of Baltimore daily. One such post highlighted a visit they made to a pumpkin patch where Braxton takes

⁴²⁸ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "So DOPE," Instagram photo, July 30, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BIgXM_9hYp1/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "I need my scoop," Instagram photo, October 11, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BLbYQgZh1T8/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg; Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), Cartoon image of Colin Kaepernick with his hand raised. Instagram image, September 22, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BKrYfzLBVaO/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg; Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "Facts!!!!," Instagram video, July 18, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BWsLj4uFfgN/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg; Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "Facts!!!!," Instagram video, July 18, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BWsLj4uFfgN/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg; Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "I grew up wit a father," Instagram photo, April 7, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BSmgYrxFcqA/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg; Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "I grew up wit a father," Instagram photo, April 7, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BSmgYrxFcqA/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

another opportunity to update his brother on the ways the little one in his charge is living his life.⁴³¹

The narratives of Gaines and Braxton, the music of Watoto, and Fidel's life and death-inspired work are fueled in part by what we know to be true: young, Black people are dying violently in Baltimore, especially young Black men. And often the narratives of those deemed exceptional (in life and death) are the only ones we hear. I will not be able to remedy that here. But I do believe that those narratives, the vocal and unbridled subjectivity teeming within them, helps to underscore the importance of seeing and hearing young, Black people for all of who they are and the gravity of what they experience and believe. They poignantly and expertly record and report what they see, hear, feel, and champion in life. They wear their beliefs and contradictions on their sleeves without apology. Perhaps it is because there seems to be an inherent acknowledgement of how human beings are forced to live with them at different points throughout their lives as priorities shift to seize critical opportunities and/or to maintain survival. Young people like Fidel, Gaines, Braxton, and the girls and young women of Watoto, reflect on much of what they encounter, whether those reflections are acknowledged or not. Their expositions don't look the same, but they draw on some of the same experiences and pain that impacts Black people in Baltimore. They also hearken to something beyond pain in their varied attempts to encourage others to value life even in the face of constant death. In these cases, the

⁴³¹ Chino Braxton (@chino_mmg), "To my brother," Instagram photo, October 12, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BLeF37NhUT3/?hl=en&taken-by=chino_mmg.

gift of social media allows us to see these powerful reflections as often as Fidel, Braxton, Watoto, and anyone else wants to share them.

A Letter to Hip Hop: Black Girls, Hip Hop's Past/Present, and Watoto

Here's the conundrum of the female rapper: Be hard, but not too hard. Be soft, but not too soft. Be available, but not too available. Be untouchable, but not too untouchable. Write your own rhymes, but have everyone swear the man next to you did. Be dope enough to get noticed by the guys, but not dope enough to threaten their fragile arrogance. Dress to the nines, only to have people say all you have to offer is fashion. Sleep with no one. Sleep with everyone. In short, be a ride-or-die bitch who's down to stash the piece and then fuck in a back alley and still be prim enough to bring home to Mom for Sunday morning church services. Madonna. Whore. Healer. Bruiser. Fire. Ice.

You can count the number of female rappers who fulfill those criteria on no hands—they don't exist. Foxy is too schizo, Eve too monotonous. Lauryn too precious, [Lil'] Kim not enough so... -*Jon Caramanica, XXL Magazine*⁴³²

The hook to Lil' Mama's 2007 hip-hop single, "Lip Gloss" asked "what chu know 'bout me?" It seems fitting in that I had to ask, what did anyone really know about her as a Black, female, teen, Hip-Hop artist?⁴³³ I checked out the online buzz around the aforesaid single, and the level of vitriol in some of the statements addressing her song was amazing. Granted, the world of Hip-Hop creativity in the sphere(s) of mass-produced and circulated music is contested (and contexted) ground for a multitude of reasons. Arguments over aesthetics and authenticity still abound. Yet, the comments leveled at Lil' Mama underscored much of the overt resistance to

⁴³² Jon Caramanica. *Baby Come On*, XXL Magazine, July 2004. Originally available from www.xxlmag.com/Features/0704.shawwna/ (accessed 10/17/04).

⁴³³ An emcee to be exact, though some may debate the use of that term based on her rhyming and writing skills, both "real" and perceived. Also, Lil' Mama was about 17 at the time "Lip Gloss" hit the music scene in 2007.

Black girls in commercialized Hip Hop.⁴³⁴ It is relatively easy for the Hip Hop community to relegate these comments to that of a discussion and assessment of skill, yet underlying issues of anti-girl/woman sentiments remain unchecked beyond references to the advent and subsequent negative impacts of the video girl/vixen/ho.

I also felt compelled to use a quote from Jon Caramanica, at the time a freelance music writer, who poignantly described the conundrum of the female rap artist. Writing in 2005, Caramanica's reflection is arguably no less compelling today than it was almost thirteen years ago. For example, there are still Hip Hop enthusiasts mourning the creative loss of a woman very much alive: Lauryn Hill. And even if we consider and examine the impact of (commercial) Hip Hop/pop sensations, Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, we must do so considering how they not only relate to contemporary Hip Hop's young audience, but how they speak to Hip Hop's aging audience, or not. Minaj's publicized "beef" with Lil' Kim years past was indicative of the poignancy of Caramanica's statement.

I argue that the additional piece that Minaj initially brought to the conversation is the notion of an overt woman-centered bisexuality consistently existing alongside the trope of the bisexual woman created for the male gaze. Others might contend that Minaj's bisexual persona, reflected in her songs and videos, is merely a woman donning male bravado to gain entry into an all-boys club where

⁴³⁴ For the sake of clarity and argument, I will be direct when I refer to the Hip Hop that is produced within the commercial realm. At this point, I choose not to make a distinction between the commercial and the underground of Hip Hop by using the "rap/"Hip Hop" dichotomy. They are two sides of a complicated coin, and divorcing them would be inorganic in this context. However, it is important for me to be transparent about which particular side/aspect of the coin I am referencing at given points in time.

membership is predicated (in part) upon subjugating women in every way (e.g., sexually, physically, financially, emotionally). I believe this may have been at play in Minaj's case earlier in her career, but she also represented an interesting turn in the landscape when she was relatively uncontested in terms of her widespread popularity.¹

So many of us assume the persona portrayed is only meant for the normative audience. This does not acknowledge that people along the spectrum of gender and sexuality respond to artists in many different ways, which has a definite impact on how popular someone becomes. Maybe we do not have to ask why or how she has achieved such appeal across the board, because it has been done before,⁴³⁵ but perhaps we should ask how her status now is impacting Black adolescent girls (and young women) who consistently engage and participate in Hip Hop culture the world over. There used to be a variety of women associated with Hip Hop that girls could look to or reject. For a time the playing field was dramatically reduced to a couple of starters and no bench. But, it wasn't always this way. As a child, I remember Queen Latifah MC Lyte, Yo-Yo, and Monie Love filling the airways. As a teenager and college student I danced to the music of Lil' Kim, Lauryn Hill, Eve, Mia X, and Rah Digga, among others. In the 2000s, I saw less and less from women rappers, but more and more of the bodies of women in Hip Hop music videos.

Some things have changed since the advent of Minaj, like the advent of Cardi B. A regular on the cable television show, "Love and Hip Hop," Cardi B rose to

⁴³⁵ Besides Lil' Kim, we can look to artists like Foxy Brown, Trina, Charlie Baltimore, etc. as predecessors to Minaj and Cardi B who have used overt expressions of their sexuality to sell records.

prominence not only with her persona on the show, but with her music. A former stripper in New York, Cardi B has reached almost 600 million YouTube views with the video for her song, “Bodak Yellow.”⁴³⁶ The focus of her music is money, her sexual prowess and ability to keep men and women sexually satisfied (especially in light of her success as a stripper), and keeping naysayers (i.e. “haters”) in line. She rejects the notion that what she raps about should preclude her from being someone to admire and inspire others. She does this while noting she wants to show off the body she paid to enhance and that no one should take issue with it.⁴³⁷ Cardi B’s rise and success through social media (particularly Instagram), television, and music is part of the hum that the girls of Watoto and other young people are exposed to as I write this. The subjective voices of Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, and DeJ Loaf should not be marginalized or dismissed given the fact they all represent the (urban) Black diaspora in motion, where we have New York, Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic, and Detroit infusing and coloring the experiences and the perspectives of these young women, just as Baltimore infuses and colors the experiences of the girls of Watoto.

Even so, Watoto arguably is speaking over the productions of Cardi B, Minaj, and DeJ Loaf rather than to them. Specifically, while Watoto is rapping about eating kale, the destruction of Black Wall Street, and stopping violence against Black people, DeJ Loaf is rapping about bodying (i.e. killing) people who try her, and Cardi B is rapping about moving on from stripping to buying expensive clothes and shoes

⁴³⁶ Cardi B, “Cardi B - Bodak Yellow [Official Music Video],” *YouTube*, June 24, 2017 <https://youtu.be/PEGccV-NOm8>.

⁴³⁷ Marjua Estevez, “Cardi B Doesn’t Give A F**k, and Neither Should You,” *Vibe Viva*, November 2016, <https://www.vibe.com/featured/cardi-b-digital-cover/>.

with the rap moves she's making. Watoto cannot afford to dismiss the aforementioned women in the game, especially since they are so popular. Instead, Watoto takes in things like Minaj's beats and rhythms, while spitting out large chunks of her content. The same may also be said of Dej Loaf, Cardi B, and male artists whose lyrics are contrary to their platform. This allows Watoto to potentially connect with their audiences, and what they're listening to, while moving forward with their own messages, particularly those focused on freedom or one's status as a queen, among other themes.

Black Entertainment Television's (BET) 2010 documentary "My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth about Women and Hip-Hop," sought to address the question of women emcees, their history, and their relative disappearance from the Hip-Hop scene during that time period. Absent from the documentary were behemoths like Hill, Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, and Minaj, but they were definitely referenced on multiple occasions because of the impact they have had on the game. What I found particularly powerful was the personal narratives several emcees shared about how they got involved in Hip Hop and became emcees and/or DJs. The common thread was childhood and adolescence: of the women who shared, several of them noted that they began writing and/or rapping as kids, preadolescents, or adolescents. Some of them started spitting (rapping) in middle school, others in high school. In fact, you could almost hear them dropping lines around lunchroom tables or on street corners and other locations that played host to a cipher or two. Black girls spoke back then, and they're speaking now, too. Watoto is one such example.

I was fortunate enough to get a link to a YouTube video for Watoto back in 2011, a then up-and-coming group. At the time, the group was solely comprised of three young Black girls, all of whom were Natur's daughters. And these little girls put Lil Wayne, one of the most popular Black male rap artists in the game, on notice in their rap response record, "Letter to Lil Wayne."⁴³⁸ The track is set to the music/melody of Wayne's piece, "I'm Single," a song that catalogues his nightly sexual exploits and thoughts on fleeting commitments to a significant other. These three girls, ten, nine, and five at the time, signified upon the work and legacy of female Hip-Hop artists and playmakers like Queen Latifah, Erykah Badu, and Lauryn Hill, as well as the work of legends like Stevie Wonder. They did that while referencing (what I contend is) the socio-political impact of Black female figures like Rosa Parks and Michelle Obama in their video.⁴³⁹

The girls specifically addressed the negative content of Wayne's raps with questions about his meaning; reprimands about his degrading language to describe Black women and his excessive use of expletives; and they even asked about how he could justify the use of his degrading lyrics when he had a (preadolescent) daughter when his song was released.⁴⁴⁰ At the end of their song, they implore Mr. Wayne (as they call him) to work with them to bring about positive social change. Back in 2011, Watoto from the Nile's language had the endearing mix of frankness and naïveté that can be found in queries offered by children their age, but their questions and analysis

⁴³⁸ Their video can be accessed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-T-FVR0WZw>.

⁴³⁹ Still photographs of Parks, Obama, and several other prominent Black women were featured in the video for "Letter to Lil Wayne."

⁴⁴⁰ Wayne's daughter, Reginae Carter, is currently 19 years old.

of Wayne's rap lyrics and glorification of sex, drugs, and money are incisive and are meant to be taken seriously. One got the feeling that their expected response was an honest conversation after a period of genuine reflection, not a pat on the head. That has continued throughout their musical careers, and the gravity of their words have only intensified with age.

Songs like "Queens," their tribute to Watson (aka Lor Scoota), and their YouTube freestyles showcase not only Watoto's talent, but grave concerns and calls for unity in order for Black people to love themselves, resist racist oppression by first calling it by its name then fighting back in other ways, which includes thriving within its own community. Natur notes that encouraging the girls to write and to create is part of his mission and part of the plan. It is also portion of a greater project to influence other young people with the voices of their peers, while concretely laying the groundwork for creating and sustaining the well of (creative) leaders for the future. And the fact that the members of Watoto create should not be taken for granted.

*Tools for the Trade: Training and Educating the Next Generation through
Neighborhood Businesses*

Natur invests in Watoto's development as artists and activists, but he also invests in the cultivation of other people within the community today by creating and promoting installments of the Reality Speaks lecture series, an outgrowth of the Solvivaz Nation. Additionally, he mentors other young people by teaching barbering at his shop, Conscious Heads, which also enables other up-and-coming barbers and hairstylists to provide services to members of the community. Kale chip production

continues through Watoto's Kale Chips, as do some of the challenges with meeting operational costs, but Natur continues to support and cultivate the business, ramping down production when necessary and ramping it up when financial resources allow. The overwhelming majority of the projects that Natur promotes encourage and endorse self-determination both for his immediate family and for others in his community. They provide tangible outlets for economic growth and expansion, as well as for creativity. That appears to be Natur's specialty: marrying various creative arts (musical, culinary, beauty and grooming, etc.) with economic development in his own community while spreading the gospel of Black self-determination and self-love to any brothers and sisters who will listen.

An enduring challenge is coming up with funds and resources to keep all his initiatives not just operating, but operating simultaneously with a tilt towards sustainable growth. Recruiting other (young) people to help with his mission and vision can also be difficult. Most of the members of Watoto have been with him for years, most prominently two of his own children. New talent has mostly come from his inner circle and from within his extended family, with other youths outside of those circles sprinkled in here and there. Recruiting other young people not only takes time but takes energy and resources. Doing so is a worthy enterprise, but it draws from the same well Natur uses to keep Watoto, the kale chip business, Conscious Heads, and Solvivaz Nation outreach (e.g. the Reality Speaks lecture series) going. Yet, the palpable tension between keeping his current projects and initiatives going as well as recruiting and considering opportunities for new initiatives might provide the necessary spark that energizes Natur and people around him. Moreover, I posit that

Black love, that LGE, provides the means to access critical stores of hope and creativity; it proffers some of what is needed to persevere and keep moving towards the goal of not only self-determination and sustenance, but a thriving community.

Through a friend, I have come to know of a young, Black man in Baltimore almost 14, whose mother home schools him and his younger sister (age 12); their education is African-centered. This young man goes to Conscious Heads for mentoring and to learn about barbering, all of which is part of his African-centered education. In looking at this paradigm, we see an investment in his education that provides him with living examples of self-determination, which also reinforces some of what he learns at home about the many ways that people of African descent have contributed entrepreneurially and financially to their own communities throughout their history. Here we also can appreciate that Natur is not alone in his quest to see his people decolonize their minds and move towards not only self-determination, but self-love: he has the support of his protégé's mother. She is a believer in the critical importance of African-centered education (both inside and outside of the classroom) and how it has to be a collaborative and enduring commitment for it to be effective in the lives of Black children and other young, Black people.

Additionally, the aforementioned case highlights Natur's role as an involved parent and as an otherfather. He takes his parenting seriously, especially as it concerns advocating for and promoting the well-being of his children, and the children of others. Parenting for Natur is an activist intervention, not just because of the work he pursues with his children, but because of his investment and care for them. I have discussed how his affective labor relates to his activism, and his

parenting and otherfathering are tied to these phenomena as well. Pete Simi et. al discusses how activists in white supremacist movements can see parenting as activism as well, with a focus on aligning the training and education of their children with their beliefs.⁴⁴¹ In part, doing these things helps to further cement their commitment to the movement in which they are involved: instead of being a drag on their efforts, it appears to give them what they need to continue with their participation even when it is difficult. Ironically, Natur may share some of the same concerns and beliefs with white supremacist parents, those being about passing along values and an appreciation for the ideologies that have shaped them and prompt them to agitate as they do.

Natur is a part of the Black radical tradition (BRT) in America, and he is aligned with strains within the tradition that do not quantify success based upon the extent of full integration in American Society. He desires to see people of African descent in America understand the full extent of their history, past and present, and not just the portion of it that encompasses slavery. He also wants them to understand how they can work together to build up and maintain their own communities. Groups to which Natur belonged (namely the Solvivaaz Nation) have gone through their own challenges, including significant disagreements and a loss of membership, but they have not completely disappeared because of a continuing belief in the inherent value of Black people and the importance of empowering them for a future of their own making. And here lies an essential component of the mission to encourage

⁴⁴¹ Pete Simi, Robert Futrell, and Bryan F. Bubolz, "Parenting As Activism: Identity Alignment and Activist Persistence in the White Power Movement," *The Sociological Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2016): 491–519, doi:10.1111/tsq.12144.

commitments to self-determination, self-love, and an African-centered (or at least Black-centered) worldview within communities of Black people: what is most significant is not the group itself but the message and the ideology that will hopefully endure well beyond the lifespan of one particular group.

Natur sees young, Black people, and other peers with which he works as the future of the movement, however he is easily identified as a leader. There are leaders also within the Black Lives Matter movement, however it is a movement that has divested itself of the importance of (officially) identifying singular people to lead and carry the mantle of the movement. It is intentionally decentralized for the sake of promoting grassroots development and proliferation that is organic. In this way, decentralization may also slow its destruction—at least from external forces that seek to infiltrate its ranks. COINTELPRO has taught different activists important lessons about the power of the state and its ability to infiltrate burgeoning social movements. Black Lives Matter promotes an agenda that is unapologetically Black affirming and globalist, with a platform that is also Black women and queer affirming.⁴⁴² Additionally, their stance honors Black villages (non-nuclear family structures that provide comprehensive support to parents and children), intergenerational collaboration that rejects ageism, and that also speaks specifically to the need to create (leadership) spaces for people marginalized within Black liberation movements of the past.⁴⁴³

As organizers who work with everyday people, BLM members see and understand significant gaps in movement spaces and leadership. Black

⁴⁴² Black Lives Matter, “What We Believe: Guiding Principles,” accessed January 16, 2018, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe/>.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

liberation movements in this country have created room, space, and leadership mostly for Black heterosexual, cisgender men—leaving women, queer and transgender people, and others either out of the movement or in the background to move the work forward with little or no recognition. As a network, we have always recognized the need to center the leadership of women and queer and trans people. To maximize our movement muscle, and to be intentional about not replicating harmful practices that excluded so many in past movements for liberation, we made a commitment to placing those at the margins closer to the center.⁴⁴⁴

Similarly, Natur is working on matters of social justice. His efforts, though, are grounded in both economic and creative development that seek to promote self-determination and self-sufficiency for people of African descent living in Baltimore and other parts of the country. They are not, however, rooted in bringing all of the margins to the center as Black Lives Matter purports to do. His and Watoto's stance is not queer affirming, but the case can be made for his agenda as Black woman-centered as we consider the role of the girls and young women of Watoto and his efforts to help them develop as leaders. Natur advocates for Black globalism as Pan-Africanism and values intergenerational collaboration and support, especially with an appreciation of both male and female elders. His ongoing partnerships with many different elders in the struggle, of which Dick Gregory was one, provided him both with a platform to share the experiences and wisdom of elders while speaking to contemporary events and issues. Natur, now in his 40s, is also an elder to those he is trying to reach, even if he's an elder on the younger side.

Furthermore, while Natur may acknowledge the changing tide and investment in speaking up and out about racism and social injustice that profoundly impacts

⁴⁴⁴ Black Lives Matter, "Herstory," accessed January 16, 2017, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/>.

people of African descent, especially by public figures like athletes (e.g. Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James), his bigger concern is how Africans living in America can reduce and eliminate their dependence on Western ideology, structures, and forms. (Moreover, he has been on that beat, sounding the alarm about racism in America since his awakening.) Self-determination is one of his primary goals. As we consider the narratives offered in this chapter in light of Natur's mission and vision, we see different young people speaking truth to power and living their lives in a society that questions their identity, humanity, and worthiness. Here we also see young people in Baltimore negotiating daily trauma while pursuing their dreams; we see young people embracing and espousing ideology that rejects Western forms and structures that diminish their value; and we can bear witness to reflections on how the brutal reality of homicide has shaped their narratives. Lastly, the spirit of entrepreneurship and self-determination is alive in different ways, from Braxton promoting and branding himself as a dirt bike and motor cross star, to the members of Watoto writing their own rhymes and learning the ropes in the kale chip business, to Natur's protégé learning the art of barbering.

Mentors looking to impact the lives of young people in Baltimore matter, but Natur invests in offering opportunities for young, Black people to create and work for themselves. He believes in the ability for economic self-determination to give young people life-giving opportunities that are not predicated upon the death of peers, either through homicide or the consumption and distribution of drugs. Another identified tool for success is self-determination in the area of education and learning one's true history. For Natur, decolonization of the mind is necessary for an economic self-

determination that uplifts communities of Black people in America. He also believes white supremacy and racism are entrenched in this country (and other western countries), and that people of African descent should spend less time trying to convince white Americans not to be racist and more time decolonizing their own minds and investing in their own communities. The affective labor involved to move towards these goals is considerable, but Natur has taken on the ongoing trials and tribulations associated with it because of Black love.

¹ We must take into account Minaj's public rift with Lil' Kim because of their similarities as overtly sexual women Hip-Hop artists that have pushed the envelope. However, if we examine album sales and downloads, Kim is not Minaj's current competition. Lil' Kim is Minaj's prototype, her inspiration (among others). That said, there are other women emcees out there that initially challenged Minaj's place as the supreme rap queen, but their influence was limited due to their constricted (or non-existent) presence in widespread commercial markets where Hip Hop music was sold and consumed. For example, Keys, a Baltimore-based woman emcee, put out a "diss" single/video, blasting Minaj as a counterfeit emcee with little skills and a weak on-stage persona (i.e. Minaj's Barbie references both in her dress and lyrical delivery/flow). While Keys gained some acclaim in areas outside of Baltimore for her viral diss single/video (http://youtu.be/7W8_xOWd4-Y) and follow-up "freestyle" to address Minaj's online response (<http://youtu.be/TgoJ0OBn6AQ>), Keys has not broken into the mainstream in ways that would rival Minaj. (And this with notable support and an invitation from Lil' Kim to be the opening act during one of her tour stops to Baltimore.) And of late, even Minaj's place has been challenged by Cardi B whose hits on social media are now in the billions across multiple songs. I argue that Keys was not necessarily looking to do so, though offers were reportedly on the table. It begs the question, what would it have taken for her to make the transition from hometown hero to blue chip recording star? Specifically, what would the costs be for Keys and her Black girl fans?

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Most revolutions start with the youth, you know the young people... Even if we didn't get a victory, we went to the next process. Lead to charges, we normally don't get there. We still gotta push forward. We still gotta push forward because even when we get that, you got all these white hate groups and whitegroups you know what I'm sayin' gearin' up militarily as they watch people not talkin' bout them. You got the government that's plannin', you got the white hate groups that's plannin', a lot of different folks out there that's organizin' around black folks we shape the world and we don't even know how we shape the world.⁴⁴⁵ –*Jabari Natur*

This work is a case study to understand how an activist in contemporary Baltimore operates within this current stage of neoliberalism, the role of otherfathering and parenting as activism, and how affective labor factors into the work. For Natur, part of the answer is focusing on young, Black people since he believes that change starts with the youth. Young people are in part the products of the communities in which they are born and raised; given that, Natur also believes he has an important role to play as a parent and a vested adult in his community, specifically as it concerns shaping the next generation. He believes the fate of the Black community is tethered to the health, well-being, and consciousness of Black children and young people. It is also tied to the potential and ability for Black youths to use their talents to feed themselves as well as others through activities and professional pursuits that build up instead of tear down. The late Dick Gregory was a consistent collaborator and featured speaker at events sponsored by the *Reality Speaks* series, which is the educational arm of Solvivaz. I was able to attend at least two *Reality Speaks* events where Gregory spoke. He shared at an event, hosted just

⁴⁴⁵ Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, May 11, 2015, Baltimore, Maryland.

shy of the two-week anniversary of the 2015 Baltimore uprising, that the universe speaks through children. The universe, vast in its scope, chooses children to relay different messages, and Natur commits to listening to what the universe has to say.

Natur values his role as a father and has fought vehemently to maintain and usurp more rights as an active parent in the lives of his children. This goes against the narrative of the absent, Black father. However, Natur is not only present and active in the lives of his children: he was invested in their education from the beginning and continues to be. He and his ex-wife sent their girls to an African-centered school early on in their education, which arguably helped to lead the girls not only to the group's name but to part of its mission/focus as their name suggests: children of the Nile. Natur, committed to the decolonization of his own mind, wanted to help his children establish a foundation built upon love for self, love for family, and love for their heritage as Africans. And while the girls attend public schools now, the education they received early on and the education that is reinforced by their participation in Watoto continues to counter the images and messages they receive that seek to denigrate who they are in different parts of the mainstream (e.g. schooling, social media, other segments of popular culture). This can be seen in their exposure to the other community members and activists who are artists, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs committed to promoting the health of Black communities and fighting against white supremacy.

From the beginning, Natur has seen what he does as a ministry of sorts. He takes fathering seriously with his mantra: "always daddying never babysitting." Parenting can be difficult for him, especially as a co-parent with the custody

challenges and other related issues he has addressed in the past two years or more. However, it is the greatest portion of his mission. In fact, he would say that his mission started at home, with changing his own world view and otherfathering his nieces and nephew, then it evolved to focus on impacting those around him, including his children. He was otherfathering back then, and took it seriously even though he was not socially conscious. Keeping in that vein of evolution, Natur is turning his sights on the important work of family healing with the Daddy Daughter Project to come.

I maintain that Natur and the girls of Watoto are organic intellectuals in a Gramscian sense, especially in looking through the lens of Clyde Wood's blues epistemology. In using that lens, Natur can be seen as a teacher who learns from the girls, just as they are teachers who learn from him. He uses his influence to encourage them to pursue work that uplifts their community. This is not always easy as he admits given the different pressures his daughters (and the other girls of Watoto) encounter by the mere process of growing up. Peer pressure to don different looks, and/or to think or act in certain ways are powerful, even with Natur's guidance. This can be seen in his concerns about how his daughters wear their hair and whether or not these styles affirm their African identity. He proactively and unapologetically draws upon an African-centered way of thinking, being, and doing. And he has chosen and chooses to learn about what ties him to African ways of thinking and doing *that give life* and help to lay a foundation for thriving in the present and future.

Natur also acknowledges that he is a Baltimore son/sun and is an American who wants to affect change in his own country and city of birth. Adopting and

espousing an African-centered and Pan-Africanist vision does not preclude individuals from appreciating and advocating for the people and communities in which they live: it offers them focus and road map for how to do so. Additionally, Natur is trying to raise activists who will use their talents to push Black people forward without a reliance on resources outside of their own community. In this case, parenting for Natur is also a form of activism. He is raising and fostering a new generation of people who will replace him in the future, and that requires investments now, especially given the impact of the pervasive violence that engulfs so many young people. As of now, Natur has worked with Black girls and Black adolescent youth for well over a decade. He saw the potential in Black youth before he pursued music and activist work with his children and other members of his family. Through it all, he remains committed to raising his children and otherfathering the children of others as resisters. Natur encourages and empowers them to resist the pervasive, negative images which cast Black people as anything less than royalty, as anything less than capable of bringing about change, especially with love, talent, and hard work.

Scholars like Nazera Wright highlight how Black girls have been important to the goals of advancing “the race” in an American context using stories and other powerful narratives. This hinged, at least in part, on respectability politics and creating a private sphere to mirror that of their white counterparts. The private sphere was one initially denied to many Black Americans because of the inherently public nature of their status as enslaved people. Currently (as in years past), all Black people are under assault in the public sphere, seen as criminal for sitting, standing, speaking,

or just *being* in any spaces where we are unwelcome. It can feel like a crime to just Be. Black. Even so, with Natur's help, Watoto contributes not only as cultural producers, but the girls of Watoto are part of a long line of young, Black artists and activists who have pushed movements forward. From the quiet courage of Ruby Bridges to the banging backbeats of Watoto, young Black people are involved in speaking truth to power and to anyone or anything else that will listen. They make sure others know it is not a crime to be Black, and that there are many crimes for which Black people have not received justice. I have also featured the work and/or narratives of other Black, young people in this dissertation to demonstrate how they engage with and conceptualize the world around them, especially in the context of Baltimore and its ubiquitous violence. From Kondwani Fidel to Korryn Gaines, they have stories to tell and they are stories worth our time. The racial violence they experience inside and outside of their communities is a relentless clarion call for Natur and people who espouse his agenda.

Talk of the public vs. private sphere also brings us to the role of gender in Natur's struggles. As a father, he is in part responsible for the well-being and training of his children. Being involved in the movement not only helped to shape the trajectory of his life but that of his girls and other children in his care. As a father and otherfather, there is a certain amount of power and influence that he wields. Natur uses this power to foster a community of resisters, even if those in his care resist his thoughts and beliefs at different times. The added layer of race and gender compound some of the challenges the girls of Watoto encounter in ways that Natur may not always acknowledge or appreciate. Even so, his thoughts center on the stakes and the

potential outcomes of such challenges. Additionally, Natur's interactions with other women who are or have been supporters of Watoto, still position him at the helm. Those dynamics matter: they have a definitive impact on the girls in the group and other people in their community.

Violence as a constant threat from all sides is something that Natur does not have the luxury to forget. He was surprised at the rebellion, but he was also proud that the youth stood up, that they took a stand. He can link his experiences as a young person who wasn't mired in the drug game and other illicit activity with those of young people who live under the constant threat of harassment from the state. Moreover, the violence that young Baltimoreans see in their communities is but a mirror of the violence we perpetuate here in other cities like Baltimore and in locales abroad.

I was totally surprised that it had actually taken place. I mean being involved in the movement for like 21 years you know I had never seen anything like that. It almost seemed like most people were just sleep. And I don't know what we gonna do. You know what I'm sayin', you know what I mean? When it started to happen and the youth really stood up and took a stand. I was really kinda like proud of the spirit that they took on. I'm not sayin' I'm proud of everything that happened, but I'm proud of the spirit. The spirit got national attention and throughout the world. You're in a country that's really violent. There's nothing non-violent about America. People kidnapped, lost through middle passage. Slavery, lynchings, water hoses walking in peace. Hypocrits: "handle your thing in peace, we handle ours in war." Even Obama-- we drop bombs on other countries. We talking about children and youth. Some living a lifestyle of drugs. Keep us sleepin' and as zombies. An experiment gone bad. Young folks are tired of gettin' beat by the police. Get 'em and plant drugs on 'em, plant guns on 'em and do all kinds of crazy dirty stuff take their money you know what I'm sayin'. And that's just in the streets. Then you talk about a brother like me who ain't really been in the streets like that and my dealin's with the police have not been good. And that's not good, especially as a black man. Racist, I mean I've had no good dealin's with white police... A lot of the white ones, they not from here and then they come. A lot of them are people

who come out of the Aryan Nation and the KKK and they come into the city with all the aggression...⁴⁴⁶

Natur's assessment of a strategy of rote nonviolence and pacifism is one of skepticism and fatigue, and while he believes that the uprising/rebellion was destructive in different ways, he also asserts that it "shook up the world" and woke people up, people with power. He also notes that what burned during the unrest was not owned by Black people in the community, and he heard others say during the uprising "if we don't earn from it then it's gon' burn."⁴⁴⁷

This hearkens back to his belief in the importance of investing in Black communities. He doesn't endorse a glorification of burning down businesses, but he understands what those businesses and other institutions may represent in communities like his and others in Baltimore when they are not owned by the people who patronize them. It's about reinvestment in those communities and opportunities to create wealth and enduring financial stability. Additionally, Natur is less interested in the strategies of old, though he has protested in the past. Natur wants to get the message of empowerment and self-determination out; he wants to "save a dough boy" coming back from prison. He wants to teach young boys how to make money as barbers within their own communities. He is not interested in convincing white people that they shouldn't be racist and that they should divest themselves of a system that fails to benefit everyone. He saves his optimism for his people and the realism

⁴⁴⁶ Jabari Natur, interview by Tanesha A. Leathers, May 11, 2015, Baltimore, Maryland.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

(not fatalism) for navigating his way through a society that was not constructed to accept him, or not all parts of him.

Natur's strategy is not predicated upon the constrained and tenuous benevolence of a government program or funding from nonprofit organizations, but it is steeped in a will and desire to develop those within his own community to sustain themselves apart from those things. He knows, intimately, that the cavalry is not coming to save people who look like him; in fact, the cavalry in many instances has been sent to seize those who look like him. This harkens back to the Black nationalists of old who sought to finance their work from within, both for the freedom it could provide in how they supported their communities, as well as the hope of building up Black institutions for future generations to lead. Frustratingly enough, Natur is faced with the enduring challenges of financing his mission on multiple fronts. Some of his targeted audience provides verbal support and "likes" on social media, but they don't support with their wallets. Natur once mentioned that he loves Black people but sometimes doesn't understand them, and a lack of funding can be frustrating and discouraging. However, what he really needs on a consistent basis and lacks at critical times is monetary support for his activist work. All the same, Natur's drive to keep moving and pressing forward with this sobering reality is not only remarkable, it's necessary to see his vision move forward.

Even with all the difficulties, there is hope. Social media provides an ongoing opportunity to engage with new audiences, as well as the means to fundraise literally the world over. Each new crowdsourcing campaign holds potential for Watoto's kale chip company to grow, along with the group itself. With each new campaign, the

potential for opportunities to educate more young people expands as well, with an ultimate goal of Natur seeing his children take on the roles of entrepreneurs. He sees the generational potential and impact all these things can have on Baltimore's communities moving forward. Natur sees all his efforts and his mission as bigger than his own children. This is in keeping with the tradition of otherfathering and looking after the well-being of others in your extended family, network, and community. This is critical because it extends his reach and the potential for good(s) to flow outside of his own home, block, and city. This also poses the potential for people who are not members of a Black community, in Baltimore or otherwise, to sew into his projects. This may set Natur and his peers apart in that he is not looking for investment from potential supporters who are not aligned with his objectives, but he is not unilaterally opposed to all outside support. He is open to expanding business opportunities and growth, especially for Watoto's kale chips.

Natur has collaborated with other Black activists dedicated to the work of educating other Black people and supporting Black businesses. He has held events at a Baptist church on the northeast side of the city on many occasions. The church itself promotes a doctrine that incorporates service and social justice. Moreover, at every event, Natur provides space for a marketplace where other vendors and artisans can sell their wares, including Watoto. Natur has established relationships with vendors and small business owners who sell Afrocentric food, jewelry, music, books, and other wares. Natur has also collaborated and reached out to African-centered organizations in other states. Limits to his collaborations are often determined by funding, time, and the resources needed to participate and provide an event that is

well organized and promoted. Natur has participated in the Speak Life Tour, an event that proffers a space for young, Black people in Baltimore (and other cities) to use their musical, poetic, and visual artistry to advocate against injustices. The website for the tour notes that it “derived its name for the youth and young adults [who] are speaking through their music ‘life,’ which is the center fusion and power behind the platform.”⁴⁴⁸ These partnerships may endure, but how can Natur expand them?

Natur’s belief in living a life that is African-centered and one that embraces Pan-Africanism is critical here. It’s not about “me and my four and no more,” and with that he roundly rejects the crass individualism that is a hallmark of American society. It simply doesn’t work for Black folks. Natur also wants to invest in people and financially invest in businesses that will provide jobs for Black people (particularly young, Black people, and those coming out of the prison industrial complex). These objectives, of course, require financing, which remains one of the biggest challenges that he has moving forward.

Unfortunately, this also creates more pressure where a lack of willing hands and available funding may delay important work Natur wants to pursue at a given time. Opportunities that may exist with universities and educational institutions are not necessarily low hanging fruit to Natur, but they could provide outlets and platforms to reach a broader audience. However, Natur’s loss of freedom (perceived or real) would be the greater issue, and it could detract from one of his goals to promote greater economic empowerment within the Black community.

⁴⁴⁸ Speak Life Tour. “Speak Life Tour History.” <https://www.speaklifetour.org/slt-history>

Though Natur started his mission disinterested in money and resources from government funded programs and mainstream non-profit organizations which tend to come with strings attached and the possible threat of greater surveillance, his views have started to evolve. Natur generally wants to pursue collaborations with interested parties in the Black, preferably African-centered, community, that will help employ others, as well as create a steady flow of money to fund current and future projects. However, the *right* grants and/or funding opportunities that would give him flexibility and general autonomy would be welcomed. Crowdfunding is still an option that provides a means for micro-partnerships, but it has been painfully slow and inadequate for pushing business plans forward.

I have not seen Natur discuss, sponsor, or co-sponsor any events with mainstream organizations, apart from participating in an event organized by Baltimore City Councilman Brandon Scott. Natur and Watoto had to modify their performance to be palatable to the community that turned out for the event, including the Baltimore City Police Department. For Natur it appears that he wants to maintain a certain level of autonomy that will continue to create space for people to speak their truths about racism, white supremacy, and oppression, and that will also allow them to pursue social justice and to advocate for self-determination for themselves and other Black people. Natur has this in Conscious Heads, a barbershop that provides a space for Black people to be who they are.

Another challenge Natur and Watoto faces is the persistence and pervasiveness of negative messages in popular culture that peddle death of all kinds, especially within Hip Hop. The images of Black people selling or taking drugs, as

well as killing others who look like them is still glorified and consumed in ways that have a material impact on the young people of Baltimore. We can see this in the death of Lor Scoota and so many other young men and women who lost their lives singing praises to the drug game, both on the inside and the outside of it. Even without money, love/LGE is a potent intervention Natur can use at any time. In discussing the merits and potential effectiveness of Afrocentrism, Patricia Hill Collins alerts us to the importance of love, which applies here: “if Cornell West is right about the dangers of nihilism [‘that which he described as a new, fundamental threat for African Americans’], then cultural responses such as those of Afrocentrism that place a love ethic at the heart of Black political mobilization become vitally important.”⁴⁴⁹

While the financial stress of underwriting his businesses and the work of Watoto is staggering, it costs on multiple levels, not just pecuniary ones. The affective labor that Natur expends should not be understated. The tremendous amount of energy that he gives out to his family and members of this community is not always returned in ways that helps him meet his goals. This could easily lay the groundwork for stagnation. However, Natur also is driven by a mission that is so important to his immediate family and those around him. And one of the significant things that emerged from working with Natur was the importance of love, arguably Black love as LGE, as well as life. In a city with a homicide rate that inches closer and closer to record breaking levels every year, a consistent celebration of life is revolutionary and countercultural. Natur knows that in a culture of death you must

⁴⁴⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, Politics, History, and Social Change (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 92.

attend to not only the dead but those who are left for dead. Natur consistently speaks life over death using love, Black love, LGE, as a tool, and I contend that is nothing new even as I also assert that it is revolutionary.

So, the question remains, “Why should we care?” Natur’s existence, in part, is inextricably linked to his family and the movement to which he devotes so much of his time. Understanding what moves Natur and keeps him and Watoto going is important to understanding and appreciating the social movements in which they are involved. Pete Simi et. al makes the case that we must consider and seek to understand how activists negotiate everyday life:

To understand how social movements persist, we must more directly attend to questions about how activists negotiate everyday settings because these experiences comprise so much of their lived reality...Activist activity extends beyond marches, demonstrations, and organizational meetings. Committed political activism is a moral status that can permeate movement members’ thoughts and interactions across movement and nonmovement situations, including family life and the parenting role.”⁴⁵⁰

Moreover, in this current neoliberal climate, the threat of further federal austerity is an imminent one. However, repression is not just a threat, it is a daily occurrence in places like Baltimore, with a backdrop of rising homicide rates, police corruption, and a failing educational system. Natur’s experience may offer more insights into how we may support and bolster the efforts of people like him. Black people in Baltimore are under tremendous stress, and resources, especially financial resources, are not always readily available for the work that Natur does to help members of his community.

Then, what can he do? What can other people do? Where is the hope? Natur sees the

⁴⁵⁰ Pete Simi, Robert Futrell, and Bryan F. Bubolz, “Parenting As Activism: Identity Alignment and Activist Persistence in the White Power Movement,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2016): 508, doi:10.1111/tsq.12144.

hope in the youth of Baltimore, and while he does not have all the answers (nor will he), he is trying to create opportunities for Black people to not only survive, but ultimately thrive, culturally, physically, and financially. From making kale chips, to supporting and organizing educational outreach through the “Reality Speaks” series, to teaching young boys how to cut hair, Natur is doing his part, but he cannot do it alone. Natur also sees the hope in other wonderful things that bring him joy, like practicing magic.

What is different about this dissertation in reflecting upon the life and work of Natur is my exploration of his use of love-giving energy, or LGE (i.e. Black love) as a father, otherfather, barber, and entrepreneur to combat multiple levels of violence against young Black people. My exploration of Natur’s otherfathering addresses a gap in the literature about this phenomenon among Black men in Black communities and how it functions as a call to activism as well as activism in itself. In a climate where Black fathers are assumed absent, Natur shows up for his own children and the children of others to stand in the gap for adults who are missing, most likely due to the violence they have also suffered living in Baltimore. We see Black mothers and othermothers do this every day in Black communities. We don’t see as many pictures of fathers doing so, especially in the face of sobering odds. And while gendered notions of Black masculinity and fatherhood could easily depict Natur and men like him as protectors, love is not the first word that those labels may evoke, and it is central to Natur’s ideology and strategy. Arguably, some days Natur may not see past the impending revolution and the need to prepare for it, but he does see what is

happening to young people on their way there, and he is concerned. He also wants to arm them with something to fight with, apart from each other.

What is the potential impact of Natur's work for young people living in the age of Black Lives Matter and the resistance of public figures like Colin Kaepernick? Social media is now rife with images and stories about the challenges of driving/buying/living while Black. There have been organized protests in places like Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore, Oakland, and numerous other cities where the outcries of Black people against past and present injustices can be heard. There appears to be a mixture of the old and new approaches to racism and violence, where the goals are to shed light on the racist brutality that exists in so many communities, alongside arming communities with the tools to thrive in spite of them. De facto segregation has surged, leaving limited resources in many Black communities. But Natur, and activists of like mind prefer to focus on cultivating the gold/goal mine that is left, not lamenting the real and perceived failed institutions and initiatives of the Civil Rights generation of old. The repercussions of this may be seen in Natur's financial struggles. In the past, Natur foreclosed access to other resources (from the government and nonprofits) that may have helped him, but the question was and continues to be, "at what cost?" What would it cost him, his vision, and those he so passionately wants to help? Does this approach hurt more than it helps?

My work in this dissertation is not exhaustive or as comprehensive as I set out for it to be. One of the limitations here is that of time. While I spent over a year attending events, interviewing, or interacting with Natur to establish a rapport, my contact hours were not what I hoped they would be. I would like more time to spend

with Natur as well as those with whom he works (the family of Watoto, Conscious Heads peers and patrons, the children Natur otherfathers/mentors and their families). Considering this, I do not think it is appropriate to theorize and extrapolate from Natur's experiences to discuss the practices and experiences of other Black activists in Baltimore or even elsewhere. (Even with more time I would think that inappropriate.) There are factors about Natur's situation that may make him unique, but even so, he is not alone in his efforts to pursue freedom and self-determination for other Black people in the city.

Moving forward, I want to collaborate and work directly with the girls and young women of Watoto to get a more nuanced idea of what it is like to pursue a life of activism alongside Natur. I also want to understand how they experience this as young, Black women and girls who use Hip Hop as a mouthpiece. Of course, this would be entirely up to these young women as to whether they would want to participate in such a work. Generally, I would only want to move forward with a project that could potentially be of greater use to Natur and Watoto, one that they could help design and establish in the future. Some options to consider are a digital project (e.g. film, digital shorts, and/or podcasts) or other work that can engage different members of their community. I also want to explore the phenomenon of otherfathering in Baltimore and elsewhere. Sheri Parks made me aware of a Black man in Minnesota who has taken responsibility for otherfathering children as part of his activism. He is also one who routinely refuses aid from government programs and nonprofit organizations. Where are other men like him and Natur? What drives them? How does Black love/LGE factor into what they do? How do they describe and

conceptualize Black love/LGE? These are some of the themes and questions I want to engage in any future research.

I attended a conference some years back at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), and it was themed “Transformations: New Directions in Black Art.” The conference was sponsored by MICA’s Center for Race and Culture and Harvard University’s W.E.B. DuBois Center for Research in African and African American Culture. As I experienced it, much of the dialogue that occurred during the conference focused on the history and interplay of innovations in Black art and art forms, in addition to important discussions and debates over the role of Blackness in art, praxis, and mentoring a new generation of Black artists and scholars in the field.

I was so pleased to hear Deborah Willis speak, not only about her own work, but of the work of her son, Hank Willis, also an artist. During Willis’s talk, she discussed what it was like to be a young African-American woman in a graduate art program in the 1970s. During that time, she was married and pregnant with her son, and someone remarked that she took a valuable space in her art program from another individual, described as a deserving young man, if my memory serves me correctly. Willis’s response was that “she made room for one,”—that one being another young man: her son. Narratives and tales of her struggles as a scholar and artist, one of her staking her own claim in the world of academia leading to a tenured professorship at New York University, the subsequent accolades of a MacArthur Genius Grant, as well as numerous publications—they don’t seem to light a candle to that of which you know she was and is most proud: making space/making room for another Black/African-American artist-scholar-man-child to do what his heart desired.

I tell this story because it links much of the scholarship here in that there is a discernible connection to the past and future, not literally through the miracle of birth and motherhood in the case of Natur, but in otherfathering and parenting as activism, all to foster growth through anticipation, collaboration, and respect for what others will yield in the time to come. Activism costs far more than we may ever fully comprehend, and Natur may never see the fruits of his affective labor through love. The impact of that labor can be seen, at least in part, as bringing together other Black people to learn about ways to improve their individual and collective good. The deployment of Black love and otherfathering and parenting as activism are not free exercises; they are costly, and I contend they are unquantifiable. However, their deployment does not cost nearly as much as leaving Black people—and Black youth in particular—for dead.

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