

Black Neighborhoods Matter

July 29, 2018



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This interview took place at the Maryland Historical Society on March 15, 2018.

Nicole Fabricant: Let's start with The Black Butterfly: Why We Must Make Black Neighborhoods Matter. What was the main argument of the book, or what inspired you to write this book? What was that burning question that you wanted to understand?

Lawrence Brown: Well, it's actually really funny. ... It was the editor who actually approached me to write the book—I wasn't thinking about writing this book until Robin Coleman from Johns Hopkins University Press was like, "I think you should write a book about what's happening in Baltimore—the systems that you often talk about, and you know, the solutions as you see them." And I was like, "Wow. That's a fantastic idea." You know, to write a book around these multiple systems that play such a role in people's lives. So I thought about what it would be—or what would be needed to do that. Which included—I thought—giving this historical backdrop ... How Baltimore became the city that it is.

Fabricant: The historical ...

Brown: I opened with Trump and this moment, of the Electoral College being the means by which he was able to ascend to the presidency with a minority of the vote. And I talk about one of the reasons he was able to do that was that America is so highly segregated, such that we have 3200 counties in America [and] people of color are disproportionately concentrated in 700 or so of those counties—and highly urbanized. And many of [the other] counties are like 80 percent White or more—a thousand or so are like 90 percent White or more—there's a few hundred that are like 98 percent White or more. So these counties, which overwhelmingly went towards Trump, and then the sort of slave-holding legacy of the Electoral College, and the sort of framework by which those electors are selected—which is connected to the Senate. Basically we elect two senators for every state, so that leaves a small state like South Dakota [with] the same representation in the Senate as a large state like California. So this sort of disproportionality and the sort of undemocratic way that our system is set up—a lot of it relies on racial segregation, and having these majority White areas in so many rural areas [ensures] that they have this electoral dominance.

I think I'm able to say, just like Douglas Massey said with his colleague Nancy Denton, that in fact, we're still dealing with American Apartheid. From there, I zoomed in the lens to Baltimore, to talk about Baltimore Apartheid, so that you know, this system—these interlocking systems that segregate

and separate communities—the exclusivity of policies, practices, and systems—that plays a huge role in explaining who has opportunity, access to resources in America today and in Baltimore specifically. So I talk about not just Baltimore, but I talk about many cities that are hyper-segregated—which includes cities like Baltimore, Chicago, Flint, Detroit, Birmingham, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Cleveland—the top eight hyper-segregated cities in America. New York is in that category. Many of our large urban areas are highly racially stratified, and so I wanted to be able to talk about what are the implications with it. Particularly as a person who comes out of public health and community health, I'm interested in these systems of racial segregation—and really I think, in a broader lens, historical trauma, which includes racial segregation but also includes forced displacement, serial forced displacement, prominently discussed by Mindy Fullilove—of physical and psychological violence, hyperpolicing, police brutality, economic destruction, and ongoing redlining and subpriming of Black and Brown communities and then cultural dispossession—these components of the mass trauma experience, I try to illuminate.

Then in the second half of the book, I really try to discuss solutions. What is it that can help to heal, restore, and make Black neighborhoods matter?

Fabricant: So can you talk a little about the solutions? I've been thinking about your work and how it comes out of an activist background and commitment to grassroots. How and in what ways do you see the book mattering and being a sort of go-to source for many organizers across the city? How will you make these really complicated ideas accessible to a range of folks who may have different educational backgrounds?

Brown: I think part of making this scholarship or approach or analysis matter is making it readable, digestible by people—especially in this age of social media and smartphones. I've been very active on platforms like Twitter and Facebook in terms of putting out information, so that's really taught me a lot about how to make something digestible. When you're confined to, well initially, 140 or so characters—now it's more of course—but Twitter sort of forces you to be concise (laughter) and be compelling in your conciseness. So that is part of the dynamic that I try to aspire to in my scholarship and a little bit in this book, which of course is more long form, but I still aim to write at a level that's hopefully readable for kids in middle school. I've been invited to talk to kids at public schools here in Baltimore because their teachers have been interested in my work, and the students they've exposed it to have been interested, so I want those students to be able to digest what I'm saying as well as those folks who are a lot older. The other impulse for me is, I'm from the Deep South and I have heroes like Fannie Lou Hamer, and she had this eloquent simplicity. It wasn't about using the biggest words, or it wasn't about using all the technical terms. It was about making it plain, and in the South that's what you want to do—make it plain. You can still have a certain erudition in your making it plain, but the value of a great speaker, orator, preacher, or person who's trying to convey a message in that context is being able to make it plain. That was the way that I was brought up, and so that remains a part of my cultural constitution to sort of say, how are the ways that I can just make this plain?

I read other scholars, and I'm always bedazzled by, you know, these grand theoretical approaches: "... the discourse this, and the discourse that ..." That's beautiful, but you know, the people I know don't talk like that. The people I know use words that flow and that you sort of hear without thinking about it. ... I don't think that means we should be dumbing it down, as it were. ...

We really need to illustrate the word "neoliberalism," which I think is like this ubiquitous term in leftist circles that very few people define and know what the hell it means when it's used broadly. ... And so, every time I use the word on Twitter, what I try to say, particularly because we are in Baltimore—a Chocolate City—what I say is "neoliberalism: the stripping of public goods in Black neighborhoods," so that immediately you have a definition that you can relate to. "Oh, you're

stripping public goods in Black neighborhoods, that's neoliberalism!"

Fabricant: Language can alienate, right? Folks working on these kinds of questions from these very communities, people talk about this all the time. They just might not use the word "neoliberalism" to describe it.

Brown: Exactly. Exactly right. So they've been talking about it all the time, they understand it, they go to schools that are permanently closed—they're the ones paying these high water bills that perversely become the rationale for privatizing their water, so they're living it. They're living in the midst of this highly racialized neoliberal system, and being able to call attention to that and relating it to what they know, stripping public goods from Black neighborhoods—people understand that. "Yeah, we've seen our public schools close, we've seen ..."

Fabricant: transportation issues ...

Brown: cutbacks ...

Fabricant: And people can articulate it, right.

Brown: And they can understand, and if you can connect that to the academic term, then people would get it. But I think it's important first to make it plain.

Fabricant: Can you talk a little bit about housing? Specifically about Baltimore's history of housing? Thinking about redlined communities, housing covenants, and the legacy of that history in particular areas.

*Brown: Yeah, I think it's important to realize that a lot of these systems we're talking about, they were constructed, they were engineered, they were built. So you really start with—coming out of the Civil War—you have Black Reconstruction, you have Black people rebuilding churches and schools, and many of our HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities) are born during this time. There's the hope of America living up to its promise, but White Redemption undoes Black Reconstruction. The Klan in the Deep South, the White supremacist terrorist organizations like the Red Coats, the Klan, and these other groups—they unleash a massive wave of White supremacist violence to keep Black people in their place. And so you have over 4,000 lynchings in 12 southern states between 1877 and 1950. You have the destruction of Black economic and independent districts and cities. In 1921, Black Tulsa is destroyed; 1923, Black Rosewood, in Florida, is destroyed; 1906, Atlanta race riots; 1909, Springfield, Illinois; 1896, Wilmington, North Carolina. So there are 100 or so of these instances in which Black economic districts, independent towns, are destroyed, are damaged severely by White supremacist violence. So it's in that context that you have also, in 1896, the Supreme Court handing down *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which makes segregation completely legal, makes it the law of the land. What you saw though, in the late 1800's, was education being segregated already, and it was so in Baltimore. When Baltimore opened its doors for Black children to enter into the public school system in 1867, Black children did not go to school with White children. So the schools opened up as racially segregated. And before then, from the 1820s until 1867, the free Black community in Baltimore had to operate their own private school system to educate Black children. So for a span of 40-50 years, the Black community is operating its own private school districts because that public good was not open to Black children. So even as early as that you see segregation entrenched.*

You see the segregation in transportation: street cars, steamboats. There was a group of Black women, sisters who attended Union Baptist Church, who filed a case in Maryland against the *Sue*, which was a steamboat that they were boarding. They bought first-class tickets and they were

placed in the bottom with the pigs and the animals and the foul and the stench and the feces and everything that would've been on the bottom of the boat with lots of animals—and they were like, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, that’s not what we paid for. We paid for first-class accommodations on the first level of the boat.” So they filed a lawsuit, and I think they won, but still, transportation, railroads become segregated. So it’s actually in 1896—*Plessy v. Ferguson*—Plessy is very light skinned—white, or nearly white—but a Black man according to America’s one-drop rule—who attempts to ride a train, and the Supreme Court says, “No, if the train company says you have to ride in the back or in the separate railcar, that’s legal.” And so it’s in transportation that the Supreme Court says that segregation is the law of the land. So then, when we move forward to the early 1900s, in Maryland, there are three different attempts to pass a disenfranchisement piece of legislation that would take away the right for African Americans to vote in Maryland. It was not just African Americans, other folks without a certain amount of property, I can’t remember the particulars, but some of the newly arrived immigrants that felt threatened by that law, and the African American community ... defeated it. So you see this move to disenfranchise African Americans in the state of Maryland.

In 1910, there’s a Black lawyer named George McMechen. He is the first graduate of the newly renamed Morgan College, which was formerly named the Centenary Biblical Institute—today it’s Morgan State University where I teach. But he was the first graduate of Morgan College. He attended Yale University and became a lawyer. George McMechen moves into 1834 McCollough Street. It was an all-White block, and he was met with—steps were tarred and feathered, Whites threw bricks through his window, they attacked his home to try and scare him off. Well that didn’t work. And so, the White community said, “We need a law. We need an ordinance to keep this thing from happening again.” And so Baltimore becomes the first city in the nation to pass a comprehensive racial zoning ordinance, on December 20, 1910. That’s the birth of legal residential racial segregation. Like I said, there had been racial segregation in education, there had been racial segregation in transportation, but that day, in Baltimore, is when residential racial segregation began to take life.

Baltimore essentially passed the ordinance four times—to keep segregation alive until [the] 1917 Supreme Court decision *Buchanan v. Warley* strikes it down, strikes down racial zoning. It doesn’t strike it down because it’s a great civil rights victory, it strikes it down because there was a White homeowner in Louisville who wanted to sell his home to a Black man, and the Louisville NAACP takes the case to the Supreme Court, and what the judge decided was not that “hey, Black people can buy their home from whoever they want to,” it’s “White people could sell their home to whoever they want to.” (laughter) That the homeowner had the right to sell their home to whoever they please. It had great civil rights implications, don’t get me wrong, but the rationale wasn’t necessarily to support desegregation. In 1918, 100 years ago, Baltimore annexes the area north of Cold Spring Road, which includes the Roland Park, Guilford, Homeland communities, which had been developed by the Roland Park Company. Their director was Edward Bouton, and he asked his lawyers in the late 1800s about racially restrictive covenants, and they advised him against it. But by 1912, the Roland Park Company was utilizing these racially restrictive covenants when [those communities were] annexed by Baltimore city 100 years ago in 1918. Baltimore is now practicing racial segregation in the form of racially restrictive covenants. The Roland Park Company is doing it. The Forest Park Company is doing it because they’re in competition with each other to attract these higher-class, higher-income homebuyers. Forest Park, the community which was developed by the Forest Park Company, is in West Baltimore. So they’re in a war to be the most racist and most exclusive—to “keep negroes out” in the language of the time—and then unofficially, it wasn’t written in the covenant, but they also tried to keep Jewish people out as well. They hired a private investigator—there was a woman who would go look into people’s backyard—they would exclude Italians and other White ethnic groups that they didn’t deem to be quite “White.” ...

Other cities had the same sorts of strategies for racial segregation and racial zoning, too. Places like Chicago, Philly, New York, they adopted it—very legal attempts to strengthen apartheid, to create it and to strengthen it. And so in 1937, the Home Owners Loan Corporation—the federal government gets involved and it later becomes the Federal Housing Administration—they enforce racially restrictive covenants by creating yet another form of, or another part of, racial segregation. They create a system of *segregonomics* with the residential security map, which had the infamous redlining component. So basically the federal government says, “We will ensure the mortgages in the green communities, in the blue communities, maybe the yellow communities, but certainly not the red communities.” Read *Not in My Neighborhood* by Antero Pietila. Eugenics—the pseudo-science upon which these color-coded communities were sectioned. So Protestant Whites in the green, Jewish communities and slightly less affluent Whites were in the blue, many of the immigrant White communities were in the yellow (they weren’t quite White yet), and African Americans and urban Native Americans lived in the red communities. And so, the thinking was, these are the communities that were worthy, these are the communities we will extend lending to—and many of those green and blue communities—in order for the federal government to lend to those communities, they had to use racially restrictive covenants. So the federal government helps enforce these racially restrictive covenants until they become struck down by the Supreme Court in 1948, with the decision *Shelley v. Kraemer*.

In the 1940s - to defeat Hitler, as Black soldiers were fighting overseas—they needed housing. And so the Housing Authority of Baltimore city, they look at putting wartime public housing into communities like far East Baltimore, Armistead Gardens, and the White community, they come out like 700-hundred strong to oppose Black people, these soldiers having housing in those communities. The federal government and the Housing Authority of Baltimore city, they relent to the pressure, and so the federal government says, “Alright, we will build public housing, instead of in these White communities, we’ll build it in Cherry Hill, we’ll build it in Turner Station, which is right outside of the city and the county, we’ll build it in these industrial areas, where there’s more pollution ... —where people don’t want to live—people with money, they don’t want to live in these places.”

Fast forward 100 years or 70-80 years, now we’re seeing development and displacement of some of these communities—Cherry Hill is under threat—now the waterfront is attractive again. Wealthier White communities want to live in those areas, but you can see those areas aren’t the industrial power houses they used to be. When the federal government put public housing in and around the waterfront—where the Black soldiers could live—they’re doing it when there’s a whole lot of pollution and the industrial plight of Baltimore is still very high. Even when racially restrictive covenants and racial zoning—even as these were becoming illegal—there’s still these ways that there’s segregation happening in the city. By 1950 Baltimore reaches its apex in population according to the census—about 950,000 people live in Baltimore—but then you also see this is also in the middle of the great migration. So Black people are flooding into the city from the Deep South, but mysteriously in the 1950s many urban areas begin to experience White flight.

So the Supreme Court hands down *Brown v. Board of Education*. Many White parents don’t want to send their children to school with Black children, so they evacuate and leave. And I don’t call it just “White flight,” I call it “White desegregation resistance” (laughter) because they’re trying to keep desegregation from becoming a reality. To keep integration from becoming a reality.

Fabricant: The idea of White flight is so sterilized ... the language of “just fleeing.”

Brown: And it makes it as if, you know, there’s something they were fleeing from, and there’s no questioning of whether or not it was—what was it they were fleeing from?

Fabricant: What was it? Exactly. Let’s name it.

Brown: Desegregation. They were fleeing from it, and so Baltimore doesn't become a majority Black city until the mid-1970s, which is an important point because many of our urban areas—I think people understand them as majority Black—they are today. Well some of them are decreasing again: DC, San Francisco, Atlanta—they're cappuccino cities. But in the 1960s and 1970s they were becoming Chocolate Cities precisely because so many Whites were leaving to get away from integration. And so you still don't have integration coming out of the 1960s—out of the '68 Fair Housing Act—because of this massive resistance to desegregation. And so then you end up with school systems and city tax bases that are decimated in many urban areas because so many of the affluent, wealthier Whiter population is leaving. A lot of that is because of 1954 (*Brown v. Board of Education*) but is also because of the urban uprisings that take place. So there is an element of fear in the White flight when it is happening in the 1960s because many Black communities begin to strike out against the striking segregation and the condition of impoverishment, deep impoverishment, the over-policing—hyperpolicing of Black communities—urban renewal, which James Baldwin calls “Negro Removal.” The construction of highways through Black communities—after the Federal Highway Aid Act of 1956 under Eisenhower, the Housing Acts of 1949 and '54—they authorized urban renewal and expanded it so that institutions like Johns Hopkins University can expand the campus footprint and displace the Black community.

Fabricant: The last thing I want to talk about is solutions. We're told here this very long story of trauma. I know you really believe in tentative rebuilding, rejuvenating. So what would that look like? Do you have a vision in the last chapters?

Brown: A lot of it is peacebuilding.

Fabricant: Right, restorative justice—what would it look like in terms of peacebuilding?

Brown: You know the police have been such a destructive, abusive, traumatic force. They helped instigate an uprising—many officers were guilty of abusing overtime pay, doubling their salary. Eighty percent of officers don't live in Baltimore city. They're operating on this war mentality. My thought is to do what Camden, New Jersey, did and that's to fire the whole force. Rebuild it. In firing the force, you get out the Fraternal Order of Police, which is a racist—utterly racist—entity that helps protect the police. What we want and what we envision is replacing the Baltimore Police Department as the Baltimore Peacebuilding Authority, which would emphasize restorative justice, de-escalation, mental-health approaches, social-work approaches, stopping the “stop and frisk,” stopping the surveillance, stopping the war mentality, looking at people in the city as people, instead of hostile enemy combatants. I think that that's the most traumatic system, but I think all of our systems—the school system, the transit system—they also have to become equitable entities. So education: We have activists pushing for a Black Studies and Ethnic Studies curriculum. They're pushing to hire and keep retaining more of our Black teachers because we lost 50 percent or more in only 2005. And the transit systems, they're clustered in more exclusive [areas], clustered in the White L. We need that in the Black Butterfly for racial equity. So that's what I talk about in terms of solutions: How can we look at every system? In terms of housing, especially housing, our neighbors who are homeless. Permanent housing, housing first—that's what we want, not the continuation of this abusive shelter system in which many folks who don't have homes, they will stay out in 20-, 15-degree weather and then go into an abusive shelter. So that tells you something is wrong with our shelters, and you know we haven't pursued many good housing strategies, and there's an issue there, so all the systems—food, water, housing, criminal justice, whatever—you name it. The goal is racial equity, the goal is how do you dismantle these systems and reconstitute them and restructure them so they can work and be implemented in ways that bring equity, justice, and fairness to all of our residents.