Introduction

The nation ignores the rage of the rejected—until it explodes . . .

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The Revolts

On August 9, 2014, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson, Missouri, a majority-Black suburb of St. Louis. Darren Wilson, a white police officer, killed Brown in the middle of the street near the Canfield Green Apartments, an affordable housing complex occupied almost exclusively by African Americans. The shooting was gruesome.

Wilson was patrolling the Canfield area after the police dispatch had conveyed a suspected nearby robbery at the Ferguson Market. He spotted Brown and his friend, also African American, walking in the street and ordered them to get on the sidewalk. He thought they might have been involved in the reported robbery.

Wilson turned his vehicle almost horizontal to block Brown’s path. Brown approached Wilson’s car and allegedly put his hands inside and struck Wilson. Wilson grabbed his gun and shot twice at close range striking Brown’s right hand near the base of his
thumb; Brown took off running. Wilson got out of his car and chased Brown.

At some point, Brown, also known as “Mike-Mike,” turned back to face Wilson; some witnesses saw Brown raise his hands in surrender; others did not. What happened next was indisputable; Wilson shot unarmed Brown multiple times. One bullet pierced his upper right chest; another went through his right eye; another hit the top of Brown’s head, killing him. The sudden violent episode lasted ninety seconds; however, Brown’s body lay in the street for more than four hours before medical examiners took his body to the morgue. The concrete soaked up the blood hemorrhaging from Brown’s body. Brown’s mother, Lesley McSpadden, cried out, “You just shot all through my baby’s body.” Mike’s stepfather, Louis Head, held up a cardboard sign: “Ferguson Police Just Executed My Unarmed Son!”

Anguish filled the air at the Canfield Garden Apartments. Sociologist Andrea Boyles, who was there the day Brown died, wrote, “It was indescribable, and everyone appeared deflated from seeing traces of blood still on the ground and the pain of Brown’s family.” Boyles expressed, “Words could not capture this climate change.”

After Brown’s body was removed from the street, his mother sprinkled rose petals on the spot her son had occupied to form a makeshift memorial. People gathered around her to collectively support one another through songs, prayers, and hugs.

During this intimate grieving moment, police cars rushed into the area with “sirens blaring and light flashing.” The police drove “straight through [the street] and decimated the new memorial,” emerging from their squad cars with attack dogs and raised rifles. Boyles wrote that, when the police destroyed the memorial and disrespectfully pushed their way through the funeral-like proceeding, some people “just lost it.”

That night, no major incident occurred between the protesters and the police. However, an uproar ensued the next evening. About a
hundred mainly Black protesters gathered at the site of Brown’s death and some blocked traffic on West Florissant, East Ferguson’s main business district. They chanted, “Hands up, don’t shoot.” The protesters were met by a wall of white police officers in riot gear. Behind the police was a large armored, tank-like truck with a top positioned officer who aimed his high-powered rifle at the protesters (figure 1).

The tension between the police and protesters was extremely elevated. Police, armed with riot gear, used tear gas and rubber bullets to break up the protests. Some individuals threw bottles at the police. A nearby gas station store was burned and looted and several parked cars were damaged. Duane Finnie, a childhood friend of Brown’s father, exclaimed, “People are tired of being misused and mistreated, and this is an outlet for them to express their outrage and anger.” When the smoke cleared, Ferguson was in the national spotlight as one of the first modern Black American suburbs to revolt, igniting the national and international Black Lives Matter movement.
Less than a year later, inner-city Baltimore burned. On April 19, 2015, twenty-five-year-old Freddie Gray, known as “Peppers,” died following his April 12 arrest and police-induced “rough ride.” Gray, an African American resident of the impoverished West Baltimore Sandtown-Winchester community, was arrested after running from a police officer with whom he made eye contact. Three police officers chased Gray down and detained him for allegedly carrying a pocketknife.

Gray’s arrest was agonizing. Two officers held him face down on the concrete. One pressed his knee into Gray’s back. The other put his legs into leg irons. Gray screamed as officers carried his body into a white police van. As the police dragged Gray, a woman shouted at the officers, “Hey! His leg look broke. Look at his fucking leg. . . . That boy’s leg look broke. His leg is broke and you all dragging him, like that!” Gray’s legs were not broken but he was about to experience unimaginable pain due to antagonistic police action.

Gray experienced a forty-five-minute “rough ride.” A rough ride is an illegal police tactic to transport a person in a way that tortures the suspect. The police did not secure him with a seat belt, and he was violently tossed back and forth during the police transport. By the time he arrived at the precinct, he was unconscious. He was rushed to the hospital and underwent surgery for three fractured vertebrae, an injured larynx, and an almost completely severed spinal cord. Gray never woke up from surgery and died from spinal cord trauma on April 19.

After Gray’s death, the Baltimore uprising began. On Saturday, April 25, activists organized a protest march beginning in West Baltimore, where Gray was arrested, heading by downtown’s City Hall and then to nearby tourist locations: the Inner Harbor and Camden Yards baseball stadium. Marchers chanted: “No justice, no peace.” “What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!” “All night, all day, we are going to fight for Freddie Gray.” The peaceful dem-
onstration turned violent as marchers, drunk sports fans, and the police collided just west of downtown. During the melee, store windows were shattered, fistfights broke out, and police cars were set on fire.

Following Gray’s funeral on Monday, April 27, civil disorder occurred again just north of Sandtown at the Mondawmin Mall. City officials shut down the subway system near the mall and sent police officers to the mall as students were released from the nearby Frederick Douglass High School. The city’s transportation and police departments reacted to rumors on social media that some students were planning a “purge” moment, packed with property destruction and violence. When the students, without transportation options, encountered police in riot gear, a violent confrontation broke out.

The mayhem moved south to Sandtown-Winchester’s Pennsylvania (Penn) Avenue commercial corridor, close to where Gray had been arrested. Near the Penn and North Avenue intersection, stores were looted, and a CVS pharmacy and police vehicles were set ablaze. That afternoon a group of African American political, civic, and religious leaders, including Congressman Elijah Cummings, Councilman Nick Mosby, and Rev. Donté Hickman, held a prayer march in the Sandtown streets. They prayed for the safety of their city’s youth. Around midnight that night, Mosby, still wearing the suit he wore to Gray’s funeral, went back to Penn and North and pleaded with young people to leave the streets. One teenager spoke with Mosby. He said, “No justice, no peace. I ain’t going nowhere.”

Between April 28 and May 3, Baltimore’s inner-city streets, mainly on the city’s west side, burned (figure 2).

Fast forward to May 25, 2020, when police murdered George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old African American man. Floyd had used a twenty-dollar bill to buy a pack of menthol cigarettes at CUP Foods at the intersection of Thirty-Eighth Street and Chicago Avenue in
South Minneapolis. The cashier thought the bill was fake and one of the CUP employees called the cops. The police quickly responded to this racially diverse and gentrifying area, which some perceived to be a “hot spot for gang activity.”

The police confronted Floyd while he was sitting in the front seat of his car. Police forcefully pulled Floyd out and handcuffed him. When the police tried to push Floyd into a squad car, a scuffle ensued, and unarmed Floyd was forced to the ground. White police officer Derek Chauvin methodically pressed his knee into Floyd’s neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. Though people outside of CUP Foods pleaded for the officer to stop, Floyd died of suffocation while softly repeating, “I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.”

A video of the merciless incident surfaced on social media the next day, and massive protests erupted in over 450 American cities. The majority of these protests were peaceful, but some turned violent. Looting and property damage were witnessed in many major cities including Minneapolis, Boston, New York City, Chicago, Minneapolis.
Detroit, Denver, Washington, DC, Charlotte, Columbia, Atlanta, Louisville, Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Portland. The magnitude of the uproar following Floyd’s death had not been seen in America since the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Just the Police?

For several scholars, the contemporary unrest narrative mainly rests on the institutionalization of excessive, aggressive, and deadly police force toward African Americans. In criminologist Jennifer Cobbina’s notable 2019 book *Hands Up, Don’t Shoot*, she claims the Ferguson and Baltimore’s uprisings centered on “the nature of police organizations and how they systematically police poor communities of color.” Similarly, urban politics scholar Cathy Schneider argues, “The structure of policing shaped the geography of urban unrest.” Sociologists Rory Kramer and Brianna Remster assert, “The impact of modern policing practices for Black and Brown Americans in everyday life is part of why civil unrest and protests have reached new heights of late.”

While police brutality is often an unrest trigger, uprisings are rarely driven by a single cause. Many people I talked with in Ferguson and Baltimore mentioned policy brutality as a primary undercurrent of unrest; however, they also spoke about other things that greatly frustrated them. Several individuals expressed that displacement and the destruction of Black homes, and “homeland,” over time were vexing and painful experiences. For instance, LaTasha Brown, a tenant leader from the area where Michael Brown was killed, declares, “You gotta identify the true problems instead of what’s right there on top. Mike Brown was right there on top; however, it was a whole bunch of layers up under him.”

Historian Michael Katz proclaims, “In almost every instance, police actions had ignited long-standing grievances whose roots lay in...
racism and economic deprivation.”

African American studies scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor pronounces, “Incidents of police brutality have typically sparked Black uprisings, but they are the tip of the iceberg, not the entirety of the problem.” My aim is to not to examine the “tip of the iceberg,” the police, but rather to dive beneath the cold water to examine and explain the buildup of long-standing grievances across time and space. I want to understand how persistent racism, economic deprivation, and police brutality are connected to the mountain of frustrations that at certain moments erupts.

One of those eruption periods was in the 1960s when hundreds of American cities went up in flames. The 1968 Kerner Report of the presidentially appointed National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders famously stated that our fractured society of “one [B]lack, one white—separate and unequal” was at the core of America’s unrest. According to the report, the civil disorders were a direct result of racist, white-led policy actions. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, housing, community development, and transportation policies destroyed Black communities and created a racially uneven metropolitan context of mainly affluent white suburbs and depleted Black urban communities. It was in disadvantaged Black ghettos where frustration fumes were ignited mainly by aggressive police actions.

Yet, our current national unrest discussions have largely relegated neighborhood inequality and dire ghetto conditions to the background. For many scholars, it is all about the police. In contrast, this book asks: in addition to hostile police actions, what other dynamics, both historic and contemporary, undergird America’s modern unrest? Moreover, how are urban development patterns and aggressive policing policies linked?

To answer these questions, I turned to the cities where the Great Rebellion began: Ferguson and Baltimore. While Cobbina conducted a remarkable assessment of aggressive policing in these cities, my intuition was that certain housing and community development pol-
icies were critical components of the nation’s contemporary unrest narrative. My research gaze was less on formal organization of policing and centered more on political dynamics that produced and reinforced persistent unequal community conditions. How have previous and current American housing and community development politics and policies, at national and local levels, set the contemporary context of neighborhood racial inequality?

**Linking Slow and Sudden Violence**

Many police-induced deaths involved sudden or fast violence. Sudden violence refers to a quick episode, like the ninety-second shooting of Brown, the unbearable nine minutes of pain and suffocation that ended Floyd’s life, and the approximately forty-five minute “rough ride” of unimaginable agony experienced by Gray. Several scholars focus on these sudden, unjust police spectacles, and the reactions of protesters, to explain instances of unrest. While understanding and stopping aggressive police actions is crucial, the police explanation of unrest falls short as decades of unjust police killings have occurred, but rarely do they evoke widespread unrest.

Rather than exclusively focusing on sudden, unjust police violence, I argue that the accumulation of slow violence against African Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first century sets a critical context for understanding aggressive policing and modern unrest. By slow violence, I refer to scholar Rob Nixon’s conceptualization of policy violence that unfolds over years, decades, and centuries across different generations and geographies. According to Nixon, slow violence is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”

I posit that repeated state-supported slow violence produces a cycle of segregation, divestment, displacement, and gentrification, setting
the context for the police killing of Brown, Gray, and Floyd. Black neighborhoods are consistently separated, stripped of resources, destroyed, and gentrified. Policies of slow violence advance and perpetuate neighborhood racial inequality, concentrating white power and affluence and Black poverty in particular places, reinforcing a racial hierarchy and the onset of aggressive policing in the chronic ghetto. By chronic ghetto, I refer to the persistence of low-income segregated Black communities in metropolitan regions across various spaces and time.

In suburban Ferguson, the uneven racial geography is represented in the stark differences between South and West Florissant. Primarily white South Florissant Road is lined with red brick municipal buildings, sidewalks, parks, and sit-down restaurants. West Florissant Avenue, the city’s low-income Black section, is flanked by pawnshops, payday lenders, and liquor stores. In Baltimore, public health scholar Lawrence Brown called the city’s enduring racial inequality a “Black Butterfly,” with its eastern and western impoverished Black neighborhoods fanning out from a north/south line of white affluence. This landscape of racial inequality is also replicated in Minneapolis and throughout metropolitan America.

It is not just racially unequal neighborhoods that are unsettling for low-income Black residents. It is the linkage between repeated state-sanctioned policies of slow violence and the formation of chronic displacement trauma. Chronic displacement trauma is the accrued, intergenerational psychological effect of community destruction and continuous displacement for particular people from their “homeplace.” Through a perpetual community upheaval and destruction process, people experience what Mindy Fullilove describes as “root shock,” where one’s entire social-support and “emotional ecosystem” is destroyed. Displacement leaves people feeling a profound sense of loss, grief, depression, anxiety, and anger that corresponds to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).