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Final Research Paper

Strange Fruit: Black Bodies and Their Treatment Within American Society

When Kanye West’s *Yeeuzus[[1]](#footnote-0)* came out in 2013, I was immediately taken with the song “Blood on the Leaves.” What attracted me to the song was the sample used in the song “Strange Fruit.” Originally, the song was a poem by Abel Meeropol[[2]](#footnote-1) published in 1937, set to music by Meeropol’s wife, two years later Billie Holiday recorded the song, and was covered by Nina Simone in 1965. The Nina Simone version was the sample West used in his song. The haunting words: “Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/ Black body swinging in the southern breeze/ Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees,”[[3]](#footnote-2) as a society we have not come far from the scene Billie Holiday sang about in 1939. In the wake of countless protests for unarmed black males who have become victims of state violence as well as citizen violence, I cannot help but to wonder how it is possible in 2015 that we still hear about the violence perpetrated upon black and brown bodies, and those victims of crime not getting the justice that they rightly deserve.

On July 4, 1776, it was declared by the Founding Fathers of the United States of America that, “all men were created equal,” and it should have been at that moment that the slaves were freed and women were given a voice in government, but in 1776 the definition of a man was different from the one today. Today, the word “man” is generally used describe humans as a collective term whether they identify as male or female regardless of cultural, religious, or ethnic background, but in 1776 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, “man” was a very specific term to describe a white male who held property and preferably being some form of Christian. The 1776 definition of “man” excluded most of the population, and because of that definition, the fight for equality continues to this day. Almost two-hundred thirty-nine years, the 1776 definition of “man” has been expanded to include those people who did fall under that rigid definition; however, equality has yet to be obtained in this country in particular for black bodies. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on how the history of African Americans in this country by examining first Reconstruction of the South after the Civil, then the Exodus from the rural south to cities like Philadelphia and New York, a brief visit to the Civil Rights Movement, and finally a quick examination of how the world has changed since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.s *I Have a Dream Speech.*

Since the Emancipation Proclamation gave the slaves legal autonomy, America had become an even more hostile environment for black bodies.[[4]](#footnote-3) You would think that once a someone who was once considered to be a piece of property was given the status of being human that their new humanity would would bring them the rights they justly deserved. This was not the case for black bodies during and after Reconstruction. It would seem that Reconstruction should have been a time where all people, regardless of gender, race, and religion, would be protected by the law; however , the opposite occurred. During Reconstruction, black people were still seen as bodies[[5]](#footnote-4), but newly freed bodies, and the laws passed during Reconstruction harmed these new bodies more than they helped. As DuBois points out in his chapter titled “The Propaganda of History,”[[6]](#footnote-5) the Black Codes were created in order to control the newly freed black population. Essentially the passing of new laws like the Black Codes, the later ruling of the legality of “separate but equal,” and Jim Crow allowed for the nation, particularly the south, become hostile to entire group of people.

White lawmakers were unsure and unwilling to find ways in which black bodies become complete member of society. They would rather black men and women to be separate from their own legal systems, than consider that the inclusion of black bodies would allow the country to thrive and grow. I believe that the resistance of allowing black people to function as people to begin with has crippled our country. From a capitalist standpoint, these “new” people now had the ability to create the demand for products and services that would lead the production of more money being filtered into the economy; however, because of Jim Crow and the Black Codes most of the population was kept in poverty throughout Reconstruction,which led to the reinforcement of the beliefs that Blacks were lazy and unwilling to work. DuBois was also guilty of not understanding that these descendants of slaves had it harder than any other race not because they were lazy but because of institutions put into place that would retard the economic and social growth as a whole.[[7]](#footnote-6) It was not until DuBois’ later work in *Black Reconstruction* that he was able to reconcile that that those black men and women who escaped poverty worked harder to get where they were, and it was not just as simple as pulling “one’s self up by their bootstraps.”

The men and women who were able to overcome the institutional adversity and make lives for themselves within this hostile America showed that people that they were more than just a body. DuBois’ *Souls of Black Folk* attempted to humanize black bodies, but as Hazel Carby pointed out in her critique of DuBois argued that DuBois was more concerned about the souls of black men than women.[[8]](#footnote-7) It was only natural for DuBois to be concerned more with men than women because at that time women, in general, were not equal to men. This should have been a concern to DuBois, but equality between the sexes has always taken a back seat to equality among the races. The humanization of black bodies was very important to the movement. Alain Locke wrote in his edited collection of essays called *The New Negro* that:

Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. There is a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing. We have, as the heralding sign, an unusual outburst of creative expression. There is a renewed race-spirit that consciously and profoundly sets itself apart. justifiably then, we speak of the offerings of this book embodying these ripening forces as culled from the first fruits of the Negro Renaissance.[[9]](#footnote-8)

Being free did not only raise questions amongst lawmakers, but among intellectuals and artists as well- who were black people as a collective and how did they fit in the American narrative. The Harlem Renaissance allowed black writers, intellectuals, artists, and musicians to be able to control how they wanted to be seen. It was the first time that black male and female voice were heard and listened to. Through art the souls of Black folk would finally be seen and forced to be reckoned with. I would argue that it was this point in history that set the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X are often viewed as the great leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. I grew up listening to speeches from both King and X, and I could not choose between which revolutionary I prefer over the other. Both King and X were great orators and knew how to speak to the masses and were deemed threats towards the social/cultural order that was the oppression of black bodies, but where King and X differ is not only in their ideologies of how we as a people should go about to insight change, but more importantly the ways in which history remember each leader. King is seen as the more acceptable revolutionary leader because he promoted non-violence to insight change and is often put upon a pedestal for political activists to aspire to.[[10]](#footnote-9) While X is seen as the dangerous radical that is often demonized in history books, because of encouraged the use of violence in response to violence. It is often forgotten that X left the Nation of Islam,[[11]](#footnote-10) and changed his believes. Similarly, King is known as the great civil rights leader, but is forgotten to be an advocate for marxist reform and rallied for an the rights for the working class and not just black people. It is these forgotten histories that have created false dichotomies of what respectable politics looks like. During their lives, King and X were both considered radicals because they wanted to change the system in which they existed. One was not more dangerous because of the tactics they used to achieve their goals for their people, both were equal threats to a system which soul purpose existed to keep a group of people from succeeding with in a free democracy.

Today, the protests going on in Baltimore are viewed as violent riots rather than a demonstration of a frustrated population. Throughout the country’s history black bodies have been victimized and abused over and over again, and these protests are an indication of that these people have had enough of and that this is the only way for their voices to be heard. The death unarmed men and women from the Black community will not be silenced anymore. The people want answers and they want change. It is scary to turn on the news and see the parallels between today and the Civil Rights Movement. Where the Civil Rights Movement was a call for full citizenship under the law, these protests are a call for equal treatment and protection under the law. It is naive to believe that the Civil Rights Movement ended with the signing of the Civil Rights Amendment, the struggle for equal protection under the law constant struggle that will not be solved overnight. The people are fed up with some laws and protection applying to the few and not all, and call for a renovation of our justice system that works so hard to put black and brown bodies back into subjectivity. When the not guilty verdict came back for Trayvon Martin, I was afraid that people would say that it is shame and go back to their daily lives, but report after report of unarmed black men and women being killed by civilians or by the police, I had a feeling that people would not be able to return their regularly scheduled programming. The people, not just black and brown people, but Asian and white are tired of hearing how the justice system has failed yet again, or how it is abusing its power. These protests are the beginning of a reckoning that will radically change the democratic landscape of this country similarly to the freeing four million black bodies back in 1863.

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5. DuBois, W.E.B. "To The Reader." Foreword. Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880. New York: Free, 1992. Xix. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. ### DuBois, W.E.B. "The Propaganda of History." Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880. New York: Free, 1992. 711-29. Print.

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8. Carby, Hazel. "The Souls of Black Men." Race Men. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. 9-41. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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11. Marable, Manning. Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention. New York: Viking, 2011. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)