

# THE "BLACK BUTTERFLY"

A historically important port city and center for manufacturing and transportation, Baltimore has a deeply rooted Black population stretching back to the 17th century. Prior to the Civil War, it was home to the largest concentration of free Black people in the US, and just across the Chesapeake Bay, the Hill neighborhood of Talbot County is speculated to have been "the oldest enclave of free African Americans, and possibly the oldest existing black neighborhood, in the country."<sup>5</sup>

In the 20th century, six million Black Southerners undertook the Great Migration, fleeing a semi-feudal sharecropping economy for the booming industries of Northern cities as well as fleeing the state and vigilante terror of Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan. While encouraged by sections of the bourgeoisie in search of the vast reservoir of cheap labor that this promised, the Great Migration was also a profound act of resistance to the ruling structure of the South, which had remained largely unchanged since the defeat of Reconstruction. It reshaped the economic, political, and cultural life of the entire country. The Great Migration tripled the proportion of Black residents in Baltimore and more than quadrupled their raw numbers from 85,000 in 1910 to 420,000 by 1970. Today, much of the city's approximately 65% Black population resides in East and West Baltimore, inspiring the nickname "The Black Butterfly." The legacy of its free Black population, its Black migrants, and its geographic position have made Baltimore an important center of Black culture and politics in the US.

Both as a result of the genuine struggles waged by Black Baltimoreans for political equality and representation as well as the need of the bourgeoisie to manage a potentially rebellious

Black population, the government of Baltimore has been increasingly administered by Black members of the Democratic Party. Unlike the near-apartheid government of Ferguson, Missouri, which had a roughly 95% white police force in a 67% Black city at the time of Michael Brown's murder by police in 2014, many of Baltimore's officials and more than half of its police force were nonwhite at the time of Freddie Gray's murder in 2015. Three out of the six officers charged in relation to his death were Black, and the city had a Black mayor, a Black police commissioner, and a Black state's attorney, while the highest office in the land was presided over by the nation's first Black president. This at once affirms the structural nature of white supremacy and how it functions through capitalism-imperialism's bureaucratic power relations while rejecting identity politics' fetishizing of form over function on the question of representation. As Chuck D once said, "Every brother ain't a brother," and the promotion of identity-based representation in bourgeois channels of power both largely ignores the functions of

those very channels and the system at large and buries the cause of collective liberation beneath career-based individual advancement. To piggyback Public Enemy with some Shakespeare, "A rose by any other name" will still beat down and brutalize the masses of people in service of bourgeois aims and as an integral part of their repressive state apparatus.