

# Cockeysville to Baltimore

Levester Williams  
at CADVC



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# Placing Matters Aside: Cockeysville to Baltimore

## Rebecca Uchill

“All matters aside” is a curious idiom. Rhetorically, it signals a turn to a blank slate, a place where preceding context should cease to exist. As a title for an exhibition, specifically one that features a sculptor invested in the histories and meanings of materials, the phrase is particularly ironic. Artist Levester Williams’s exhibition bearing this title, presented by the Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture (CADVC) at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), from September 19 to December 14, 2024, is assembled from varied matters and materials, including used bedsheets from a Virginia penitentiary, marble steps that once entered a Baltimore row house, and the found object of a 1956 autobiography by Billie Holiday, pressed into a crevice in a gallery wall. The material matters that are the artistic mediums of these works—and the historical conditional matters that they address—are firmly front and center. In the amphitheater directly adjacent to CADVC, a dematerialized exploration of such matters continues with a dual presentation of Williams’s video works “Cockeysville” and “standing ground (on Washington)” (both 2024), which show the trajectory of a salient quarried material and its deployment in Baltimore’s built environment—the subject of Michelle Diane Wright’s essay in this publication. Williams’s work plays with our expectations for the composition of worldly matters, proposing other ways of existing in the process.

Williams, a sculptor, treats the world as his poetic matter. He maneuvers, arranges, and disrupts materials to make

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Nia Hampton in “standing ground (on Washington)” from “dreaming of a beyond: Baltimore,” filmed at the base of the Washington Monument in Baltimore in November 2023 (photo courtesy of Levester Williams)

works of art, and he takes the same approaches to mediating places and experiences, revealing that sculpting can indeed occur with physical “matters aside.” Williams describes his practice as one that asks how to “rearrange signifiers in ways that allow different propositions to happen.”<sup>1</sup>

In one illustrative series of performative works, Williams uses the device of an oral prosthesis that he calls “Cottonmouth” to disrupt language and mediate sound. In 2014, Williams visited the Shirley Plantation in Virginia to pick cotton to use in making sculptural objects. While on-site, he staged a performative action of picking cotton and placing it in his mouth. This improvised action led to his creation of a cotton-resin mouthpiece that he has used to obstruct and intervene in his speech, sculpting sound and language. Williams describes his disruption of habitual ways of being as a form of “play”—with critical intent. As someone who has described his own speech as “not conventional,” and noted his “difficulty producing certain syllables in certain languages,” the artist has experienced his speech as “objectified”—an act that is hyper-distorted and remediated through performances that deploy growling sounds through masks and sculptural mouthpieces such as “Cottonmouth.”<sup>2</sup>

Here Williams explicitly points to the influence of Frantz Fanon, who posited speech as a “means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization. Since the situation is not one-way only, the statement of it should reflect the fact.”<sup>3</sup> Williams explores the ways that a person may be acculturated, evaluated, or otherwise perceived through speech acts and has said, “My speech became an object that I had to grapple with.” In other words, in becoming the mediated object as well as the artistic mediator, Williams addresses, in his words, “the binary of what is a subject and what is an object.”<sup>4</sup>

Levester Williams began his residency at CADVC with a body of research into Cockeysville marble already underway. In a visit to the Public Humanities Advisory Committee in October 2023, Williams shared the influence

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1 Levester Williams, interview with the author, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), July 10, 2024

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2 Williams, interview

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3 Frantz Fanon, “Black Skin, White Masks” (London: Pluto Press, 1986; originally 1952, Editions de Seuil, as “Peau Noire, Masques Blanc”), 17–18

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4 Williams, interview





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Savannah Knoop and Levester Williams offer a movement workshop to UMBC students in Baltimore City, March 5, 2024. (photo courtesy of Rebecca Uchill)



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Sheila Gaskins, Nia Hampton, and Bao Nguyen film with Levester Williams and Savannah Knoop at Baltimore's Mount Vernon, November 3, 2023. (photo courtesy of Rebecca Uchill)



of an excerpt of Billie Holiday's book, "Lady Sings the Blues," in which she described cleaning the marble steps of Baltimore row houses. He also presented his research into the AFRO "Clean Block" campaign of the 1930s, and the racialized mythologies of marble steps and cleanliness, both discussed in Michelle D. Wright's essay published here, as well as the focus of Williams's residency-based research at Maryland Center of History and Culture and elsewhere.

As part of his previous research, Williams traveled to Baltimore to film performers interacting with the marble in buildings and monuments. He has described these visits as a test in negotiating public space and public performance outside the studio environment. This experience informed his approach to filming during the 2023–2024 research residency. He worked with a mother/daughter duo of artists—Sheila Gaskins and Nia Hampton (a UMBC IMDA MFA student)—who represent, between them, longstanding practices of multidisciplinary art making focused on Baltimore communities and history. Williams invited performance artist Savannah Knoop to work with Gaskins and Hampton prior to filming, to facilitate thoughtful and intentional interaction with the marble. The group discussed the racial violence pervading the experience of Mount Vernon's monumental tribute to George Washington, and the actions in the site-based performances that followed embodied this "confrontation...and reclamation of agency."<sup>5</sup> In an interview with Adriana Fraser, Gaskins stated, "When I was interacting with the marble [in the work with Williams], it wasn't a pretty thing. I was thinking about my ancestors."<sup>6</sup> These meetings also facilitated conversations intended to create a mindful and safe experience of performing, placing accessibility at the forefront—discussing expectations, bodily limitations, and other concerns about performance interaction.

During filming in the fall of 2023, the performers staged improvisational movements in relation to different sites around the Washington Monument in Baltimore's Mount Vernon neighborhood. Bao Nguyen, an artist who is also an MFA student in the UMBC IMDA program, assisted with

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5 Levester Williams, email message to author, August 12, 2024

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6 "UMBC's Exploratory Artist in Residence Levester Williams Examines History of Cockeysville Marble in Film Project," July 15, 2024, <https://umbc.edu/stories/exploratory-artist-levester-williams-marble/>

filming. Williams edited the videos, collaborating with sound designer Dan Shields over many months following these performance activities, while also calibrating the videos for the specific site of their presentation (in an outdoor video projection gallery). In March 2024, Williams and Knoop returned to UMBC to lead a student movement workshop focused on responding to the environment of a Baltimore city block.

Throughout this exploration, and in the new video works resulting from his experiments through artistic research, Williams shows how matters come to matter through interaction and interpretation. One axis of Williams's investigation is the relationship of materials to place: Cockeysville marble is quarried in one place, and then used for building elsewhere (from one "Marble Hill" to another, in Wright's scholarship). Another key axis of consideration in Williams's work is the material gravity of the cultural imaginary—marble, for example, becomes symbolic of a cleanliness that belies threats of racialized violence—and the possibilities of a poetic imaginary through which an artist may leverage or shift these arrangements to open new conversations. These activities are traced in the CADVC exhibition "all matters aside," curated by Lisa Freiman. Across these activities, Levester Williams has made an artistic practice of mediating lived experience and places, through the apparatuses of the lens, the artistic object, the prosthesis, and the facilitator. His work reveals how calibration, manipulation, distortion, conversation, and displacement (in a sense, placing matters aside) are all acts of sculpting—which is to say, understanding and claiming agency in a world complex matter.

Rebecca Uchill is director of the Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture (CADVC) at UMBC, where she initiated the center's pilot Exploratory Research Artist Residency Program.

CADVC projection demo event at the  
UMBC Fine Arts Building amphitheater,  
February 29, 2024 (photo: Tedd Henn)



CADVC projection demo event at the  
UMBC Fine Arts Building amphitheater,  
February 29, 2024 (photo: Tedd Henn)



WORKS

# Cockeysville

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Drone images from Beaver Dam and from the Texas Quarry in Cockeysville, Maryland, collected as part of Levester Williams's research

**pp. 10–15:** Drone images from Beaver Dam by Billy Dufala. Drone images from Texas Quarry by Mike Lovelace. The former supported by RAIR Philly  
(all photos in this sequence courtesy of Levester Williams)













# Baltimore

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**Opposite:** Nia Hampton (top) and Sheila Gaskins (bottom) in "standing ground (on Washington)" from "dreaming of a beyond: Baltimore," filmed at the base of the Washington Monument in Baltimore in November 2023

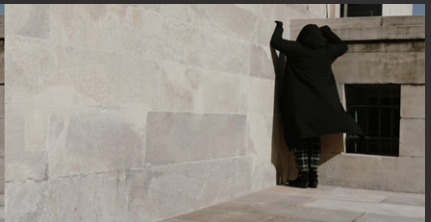
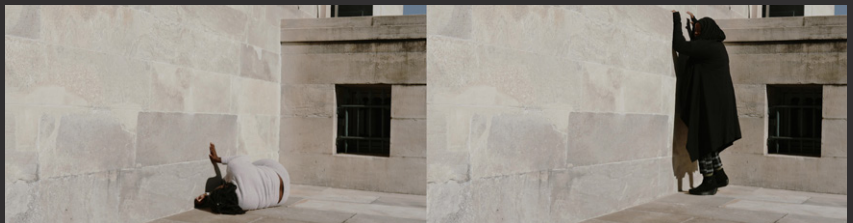
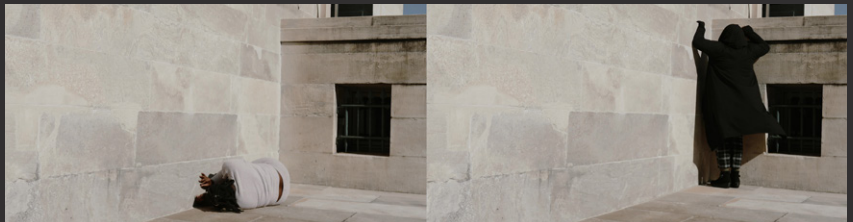
**pp. 18–21:** Video stills from "dreaming of a beyond: Baltimore"

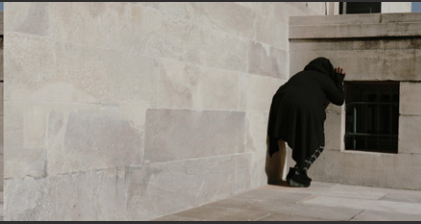
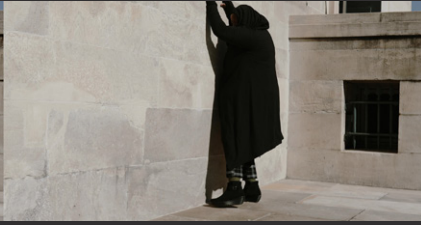
**pp. 22–23:** Video stills of Nia Hampton in the vignette "Nia's embrace" from "dreaming of a beyond: Baltimore," filmed at Mount Vernon Park Place in November 2023

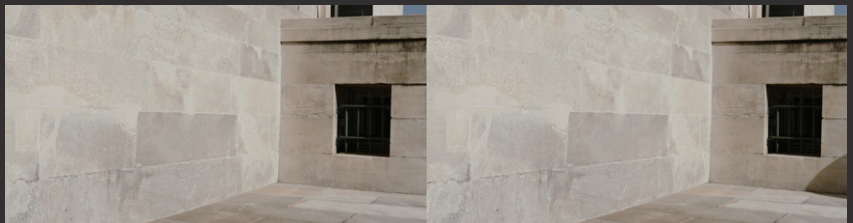
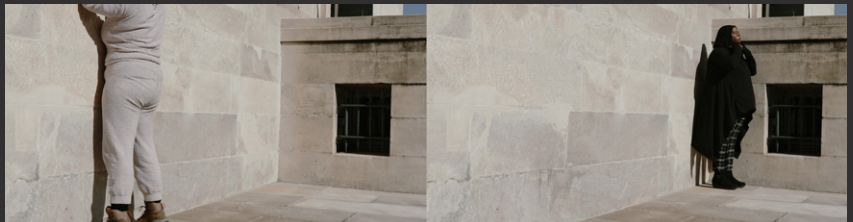
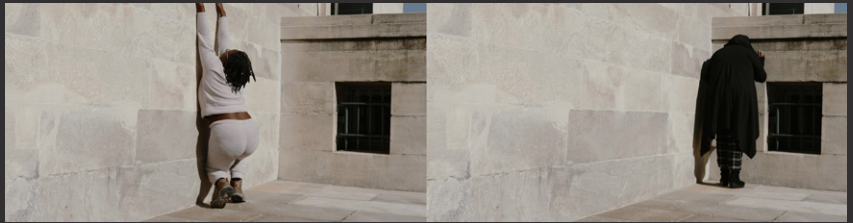
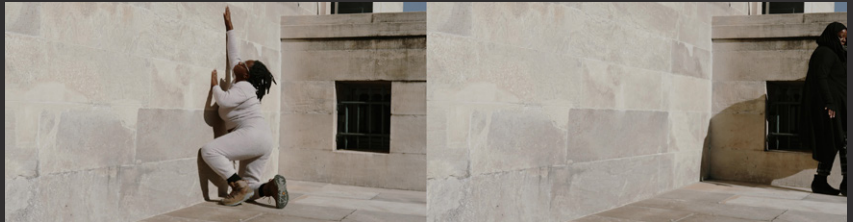
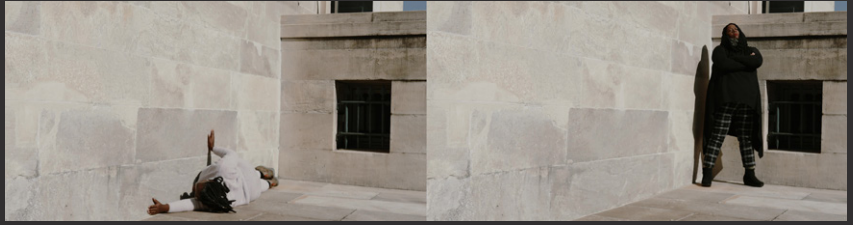
**pp. 24–25:** Sheila Gaskins and Nia Hampton in "Peace" and "War," respectively, from "dreaming of a beyond: Baltimore," filmed in Mount Vernon, Baltimore in November 2023 (all photos in this sequence courtesy of Levester Williams)







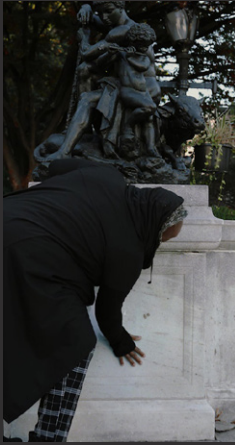


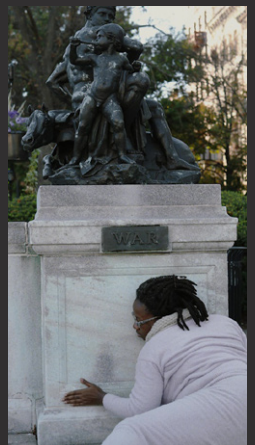
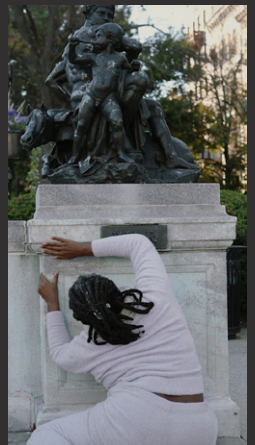














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African American women clean the iconic marble stairs of West Baltimore in preparation for the AFRO Clean Block, circa 1955. (photo courtesy of the AFRO American Newspapers Archives)

# Scrubbed Clean: The Pursuit of Purity in Baltimore

Michelle Diane Wright

This essay analyzes primary source quotations that use racist language, which may be upsetting to some readers.

Two Marble Hills exist in the Baltimore metropolitan area: one in the city and one in the county, one all Black and one all white, and both named for the sought-after rock associated with veins of black and white that meld together to create its coveted beauty. The color of marble depends on its mineral composition. Pure marble is white, and any additional color is considered an impurity. Purity's central characteristic is freedom from contamination, or the absence of anything that debases or pollutes. This truth about marble is allocated to the notion of space in the United States—having a pure space translates to homogeneity of population, and this homogeneity requires the removal of *populations considered impure*. The pursuit of purity of space in Baltimore has created two unequal worlds of Black and white that survive today.

Established in 1877, close to the Beaver Dam Quarry, Marble Hill in Baltimore County was an all-white village that, at its height, boasted 800 residents. Many of its inhabitants labored at the quarry, and the region is now a section of Cockeysville in Baltimore County near the intersection of York and Shawan Roads.<sup>1</sup> The row house community of Marble Hill, in Westside, Baltimore, was established in the 1890s, replete with all-white marble steps procured from the county of Marble Hill. In 1911, after a Black man purchased a home on McCulloh Street, the city neighborhood was designated a Black enclave.<sup>2</sup> The seven-block district is a subdivision of the Upton neighborhood that subsequently became the hub of the Civil Rights Movement in Baltimore

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1 Teri L. Rising, "Marble Hill: A Community At The Crossroads," *Historical Society of Baltimore County: History Trails* 41, no. 1 (Autumn 2009), 1–8

2 According to numerous sources, all cited in this essay, W. Ashbie Hawkins purchased 1834 McCulloh Street in 1910, making him the first African American property owner in the neighborhood. He then rented the property to African American lawyer George W. F. McMechen. This transaction prompted the city to create the covenants. For more detail, see Antero Pietila, "Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City" (Chicago: Iva R. Dee, 2010), 5–21

in the 1950s and 1960s. It was later the location of Freddie Gray's death in 2015. What connects the two Marble Hills is their moniker and the centrality of marble in their respective histories—one, a source of the pure white stone, the other a recipient. This is the end of the commonality due to our nation's sordid history of legal racial segregation, which interestingly commenced in the Marble Hill area of the city.

Baltimore implemented the United States' first racial housing covenant with a 1911 law segregating Blacks, whites, and other ethnicities into designated spaces of the city. During the public discussion of this new law, newspaperman H. L. Mencken arrogantly commented in the *Evening Sun*:

Why is Baltimore such a pest-hole?...The niggero is to blame. Wherever he lives and his being, there the death rate soars...But, who ever heard of a plan for the decent house of negroes in Baltimore. When the darky tries to move out of his sty and into a human habitation, a policeman now stops him. But who cares? The negro is an unwelcome citizen.<sup>3</sup>

Mencken was merely echoing the sentiments of many white Baltimore residents. Baltimore's desire to maintain pure white neighborhoods was palpable. The 1911 ordinance stated its objective as "preserving the peace, preventing conflict and ill-feeling between the white and colored races in Baltimore city."<sup>4</sup> Baltimore was divided into now-recognizable neighborhoods based on the *desirability* of the resident's skin color, religion, or country of origin, ensuring the purity of white enclaves. This practice later led to federal and local agencies developing maps that color-coded and divided the nation's municipalities according to a risk assessment of their creditworthiness, but Baltimore initiated the road map for those laws.<sup>5</sup>

No matter the racial demographics of each neighborhood, Baltimore has long been celebrated for its white marble steps. Once only for the aristocracy, the pure white stairs of Baltimore became a ubiquitous expression of conformity and the crown jewel of the common Baltimore

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3 H. L. Mencken, "Evening Sun," Thursday, October 26, 1911, 6

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4 Garrett Power, "Apartheid Baltimore Style: The Residential Segregation Ordinances of 1910–1913," "Faculty Scholarship (1983)," 184, [https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/fac\\_pubs/184](https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/fac_pubs/184)

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5 Morgan Grove et al., "The Legacy Effect: Understanding How Segregation and Environmental Injustice Unfold over Time in Baltimore," "Annals of the American Association of Geographers 108," no. 2 (2018), 532

CIVILIZATION AS IT IS UNDERSTOOD IN AMERICA



Policeman Watching to Keep Negroes Away While the Mob Gets in its Work

This cartoon from "The AFRO American Ledger" from September 27, 1913, illustrates the African American perspective concerning lengths that Baltimore citizens and authorities went to ensure racial segregation in the city. (photo courtesy of the AFRO American Newspapers Archives)



White women clean the iconic marble stairs of Penrose Street in Baltimore. Although the city was deeply segregated by race, women of all ethnicities considered it their responsibility to maintain the cleanliness of their abodes. (A. Aubrey Bodine, photo courtesy of the Maryland Center for History and Culture, B402, A. Aubrey Bodine Collection)



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6 John C. Schmidt, "Our Famous White Marble Steps," "Baltimore Sun," February 24, 1963, 10

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7 Schmidt, "Our Famous White Marble Steps"

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8 Schmidt, "Our Famous White Marble Steps"

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9 Phil Lord, "Monumental Maryland Marble: The Cockeysville Quarries 1800–1940," The Baltimore Architectural Foundation and Baltimore Heritage, Facebook, September 17, 2021, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=549924889553908](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=549924889553908)

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10 J. Jefferson Miller, "The Designs for the Washington Monument in Baltimore," "Society of Architectural Historians," 23, no. 1 (March 1964), 19

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11 Miller, "Designs for the Washington Monument," 27

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12 Miller, "Designs for the Washington Monument," 27

row home. "Brick gave Baltimore houses strength; native stone gave them class and relieved the drabness of solid red walls."<sup>6</sup> Initially, the marble for these steps came from the Beaver Dam Quarry near Marble Hill but was later procured from Georgia mines for cheaper prices.<sup>7</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, marble steps for one's home could be secured for \$200 for both product and installation. "Baltimore's massed marble steps spill from doorways in row after row and block after block. They are the fronts that builders put up to muster an army of home buyers who wanted them despite the challenge of keeping them white."<sup>8</sup>

Notably, the source of the stone is the same Beaver Dam Quarry marble that dons the Baltimore Washington Monument in Mount Vernon, as well as the National Capital in Washington, DC, and other notable US structures.<sup>9</sup> The aspect that was most desirable about the Beaver Dam marble was its complete whiteness—that it was free from contamination. Baltimore's Mount Vernon Washington Monument was the first monument in the nation dedicated to George Washington, and the designer used Beaver Dam marble. It was envisioned initially in 1809 as a trophy "to the memories of great and good men as an encouragement to victorious and heroic deeds."<sup>10</sup> The Mount Vernon neighborhood was selected when Col. John Eager Howard donated 200 square feet from his vast Belvedere Estate. At the time, the location was outside of the city confines and comparatively uninhabited. A design competition was held, and ultimately Robert Mills's Roman column creation was erected and topped with a sculpture of George Washington created by Italian artist Enrico Causici.<sup>11</sup> Completed in 1829, the pure white monument was created in an elite pure white neighborhood also free from racial debasement. Mount Vernon Place is today considered to be the cultural and social center of Baltimore City. The community remains predominately white.<sup>12</sup>

Builders coveted marble that was entirely white with no black veining, for both monuments and common residential front steps. It was that quintessential spotlessness that

the average Baltimore resident endeavored to prolong. Historically, ancient Greeks and Romans preferred marble for structures because of its clean white tone, which they connected with divinity, dignity, and purity. Anything that disrupted that pure whiteness was considered dirty and undesirable, from the black veining of white marble to the unwanted Black people living within a city that many wished would maintain its majority white population. In an effort to scrub the city clean, the Baltimore Democratic Party launched a campaign with the slogan “This Is a White Man’s City,” urging party members and like-minded citizens to “keep down the niggers.”<sup>13</sup>

Analogous to the definition of purity, *cleanliness* is generally defined as a state free from germs, dirt, trash, or waste, and the habit of achieving and maintaining that state. Perusing newspapers from throughout the twentieth century reveals that Baltimoreans of all ethnicities were obsessed with the presentation and cleanliness of their abodes. Scrubbing the outside of one’s home was of utmost importance to the residents of Charm City. Remarkably, Baltimore didn’t have a sewer system until 1905 to alleviate “unpleasant and dangerous conditions.”<sup>14</sup> High levels of cholera and typhoid, not to mention the miasma, was of elevated concern and equated with being unclean, which was generally associated with Black people, Jewish people, and recent immigrants. Following the new sewer, the city established a street cleaning department, and police commenced issuing citations to residents with unkept homes based on the belief that “if the people were cleaner in their household work there would be less trouble.”<sup>15</sup> Local art collector Henry Walters was so fearful that the filth of the lower classes would negatively impact Baltimore’s gentry that he sponsored the Walters Public Baths, first in Little Italy and then in additional locations throughout the city.<sup>16</sup> Notions of cleanliness were thusly amplified, and Baltimore citizens continued to emphasize personal responsibility as positively contributing to the overall aesthetic of the city, especially when it came to the cleansing of the iconic white marble steps.

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13 “White Control,” “Baltimore Sun,”  
Monday, September 17, 1923, 5

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14 “He Pleads for Sewers,” “Baltimore Sun,”  
Monday, March 27, 1905, 12

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15 “Wants Police to Aid,” “Baltimore Sun,”  
Monday, August 15, 1910, 7

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16 William R. Johnston, “William and  
Henry Walters: The Reticent Collectors”  
(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University  
Press, 1999), 129

Over the decades, myriad programs promoted neighborhood cleanliness, one of note being AFRO Clean Block. Established in 1892 and still in existence, the “Afro-American” newspaper is the longest-running Black publication in the United States. As part of community outreach, staff at the publication created AFRO Clean Block in 1934 as a neighborhood beautification project. It is currently the oldest environmental program in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Every summer from 1934 to at least the 1960s, the publication offered residents advice concerning the best way to keep marble steps clean. One article boasted, “In a normal life span of 40 years of housekeeping, each housewife will spend 150 days merely scrubbing her front steps.”<sup>18</sup> Another article touted sandstone as the best method for keeping the stoop white: “This sandstone can only be bought from a marble dealer. One of such marble dealers is Charles Hall, whose office is in the Majestic Hotel, McCulloh and McMechen Streets.”<sup>19</sup> Notably, in an article titled “The Art of Washing Steps,” the “Afro” described, “the marble stoops that protrude from every Baltimore home. Their unblemished whiteness symbolizes purity.”<sup>20</sup> White steps were cherished in Black neighborhoods, and further, whiteness symbolized purity in countless cultures. Scrubbing away the black marks that marred the purity of the marble mirrored the sentiments of the Baltimore segregationists who strove to cleanse the city of impure ethnicities.

Singer Billie Holiday wrote at length about “scrubbing those damn white steps all over Baltimore.”<sup>21</sup> In 1931, when Holiday was sixteen years old, she started a marble step scrubbing business where Black families in her neighborhood would pay a nickel for scrubbing the stairs using the resident’s cleaning equipment. To make more money, she used her own scrubbing implements and commenced scrubbing steps in white neighborhoods, where she could charge fifteen cents.<sup>22</sup> According to multimedia artist Levester Williams, it was reading about Billie Holiday’s marble stair scrubbing that inspired his “dreaming of a beyond: Baltimore” project that is included in the 2024 “all matters aside” exhibition at the Center for Art,

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17 “Afro Clean Block Is the Oldest Environmental Program of Its Kind in the U.S.,” Afro Charities website, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.afrocharities.org/projects/clean-block>

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18 “White Marble Steps,” *Afro-American*, July 16, 1960, 4

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19 “Sandstone Makes Big Improvement in Cleaning of Marble Steps,” *Afro-American*, July 28, 1934, 5

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20 “Sandstone Makes Big Improvement,” 5

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21 Billie Holiday and William Dufty, “Lady Sings the Blues” (New York: Harlem Moon, 1956), 8

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22 Holiday and Dufty, “Lady Sings the Blues,” 8

Design, and Visual Culture at UMBC. Williams was struck by the “fetishism of clean marble steps” and the fact that when Holiday offered to clean the floors within the houses of white residents, the request was denied. His artwork thus explores notions of interiority and exteriority created by the racial boundaries within Baltimore.<sup>23</sup> This artistic consideration of those boundaries is placed at the threshold of each home in the city, delimiting the spaces considered acceptable for Black bodies to exist. It is more widely expressed at each residence that possessed white marble stairs—homes that paid Black youth fifteen cents for their labor to remove all evidence of contamination.

Property holders valued the pure whiteness of their marble steps in all parts of the city. The “Sun” proclaimed: “The sun shone on the back of many checkered-aproned house woman as they bent over many white marble steps.” Further, “Armed with sandstone and buckets, they came forth and attacked the footprints which marred the virgin whiteness of the stairs.”<sup>24</sup> The pursuit of whiteness was perceived to be an essential duty of every homeowner no matter their ethnicity. Women were responsible for removing imperfections that interrupted the purity of cleanliness, while white men in power were charged with the duty of scrubbing the city clean of the African American blemish. Removal from sight in residential space veiled the fact that in many other facets of life, ethnicities mixed without conflict. Workplaces such as Bethlehem Steel employed Blacks and whites, who at the end of the day were forced to retreat to their respective segregated corners.<sup>25</sup> “White and black employees, men and women, in all branches work side by side, use the same restrooms,” proving that at the core of selective segregation practices, the bottom line was a determination concerning the ability to garner profit.<sup>26</sup>

Baltimore’s segregation is not merely a heartbreaking story from the city’s past. The legacy of that reprehensible practice is still experienced within Charm City. During the early and mid-twentieth century, “blockbusting,”<sup>27</sup> “panic peddling,”<sup>28</sup> “land installment contracts,”<sup>29</sup> and other tactics shaped the Baltimore neighborhoods of today. Although the

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23 Levester Williams, in discussion with the author, Wednesday, July 10, 2024, University of Maryland Baltimore County

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24 Helen Paul White, “Baltimore Is City of Marble Steps,” “Sunday Sun,” February 12, 1926, 8

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25 Pietila, “Not in My Neighborhood,” 76

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26 “Segregation,” “Afro-American,” Saturday, August 4, 1938, 4

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27 “Blockbusting” is the practice of persuading owners to sell property for significantly less than its market value, based on the fear that people of another ethnic or social group are moving into the neighborhood, and then selling that property at a higher price to a member of the marginalized ethnic or social group.

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28 “Panic peddling” is defined as encouraging property owners to sell their property due to the moving in of a particular ethnic group that will cause the property value to drop.

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29 “Land installment contracts” were used when banks would not make loans to African Americans. The buyer and seller of a property agree that the buyer will pay the seller in installments over a set period of time. While the buyer takes immediate possession of the property and has the right to use it, the seller retains legal title until the final payment is made. At that point, the seller records a deed transferring the title to the buyer. This transfer often did not occur, and Black people were evicted and lost the money already invested. Land installment contracts commenced in the 1940s and still continue today, although with much stricter regulations by the state.



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This 1845 photograph of Baltimore's Washington Monument reveals both the pure whiteness of the marble, the beginning stages of the establishment of the elite Mount Vernon neighborhood. (photographer unknown, Washington Monument, circa 1845, photo courtesy of the Maryland Center for History and Culture, CSPH 581, The Cased Photograph Collection)



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A circa 1910 photograph of the Beaver Dam Quarry, which provided much of the pure white marble for the Baltimore Washington Monument and the marble stairs that donned the early affluent homes of the city (photographer unknown, Beaver Dam Quarry, circa 1910, photo courtesy of the Maryland Center for History and Culture, CC1003, BCLM: City Hall Collection)

1968 Fair Housing Act prohibited these forms of real estate discrimination, the die had been cast for the understood parameters of communities, because prejudice could not be eradicated by law. Remarkably, many African American civil rights leaders advocated for such tactics as blockbusting as a way to swiftly integrate the city. Supported by the “Afro-American” newspaper, firebrand Lillie May Carroll Jackson and her daughter Juanita Jackson Mitchell, who was both a lawyer and Marble Hill resident, proclaimed that forced and immediate residential integration was the answer: “We don’t go for half-compromises. We go for open occupancy straight down the line.”<sup>30</sup> While immediate and total desegregation was a short-term vehicle for racial mixing, it led to what journalist Antero Pietila has labeled a “transitory phase between desegregation and predictable resegregation,” whereby Black people were subsequently forced to remain within the newly designated communities without choice.<sup>31</sup> This practice, in turn, has led to Lawrence T. Brown’s understanding of Baltimore’s “White L” and “Black Butterfly.”

Brown labeled the white and Black sections of the city in his eloquent examination of Baltimore’s history of racial segregation and the profound and troubling ways it continues to impact the lives of the city’s residents. Brown has described the ongoing predicament:

Baltimore is a city that is hypersegregated into two parts. Because of 105 years of racist policies and practices, Baltimore’s hypersegregated neighborhoods experience radically different realities. Due to this dynamic, the white neighborhoods on the map that form the shape of an “L” accumulate structured advantages, while Black neighborhoods, shaped in the form of a butterfly, accumulate structured disadvantages. Baltimore’s hypersegregation is the root cause of racial inequity, crime, health inequities/disparities, and civil unrest.<sup>32</sup>

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30 “Clash Erupted,” *The American*,  
January 31, 1961, 1

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31 Pietila, “Not in My Neighborhood,” 172

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32 Lawrence T. Brown, “The Black Butterfly: The Harmful Politics of Race and Space in America” (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 91

Using painstaking research and historical data, Brown illustrates that right in front of us, policies to perpetuate and tighten the reins of racial inequalities exist even under Black mayors and a Black president. While Brown offers viable solutions, the policies that maintain purity and inequality in Baltimore continue.

Because capitalism dictates the obligation to protect property values, the desire to mitigate racial inequalities is diametrically opposed to city policy and practice. Old methods have become habit. Baltimoreans of all ethnicities hold tight to different perceptions of space, and there is an ongoing romance with pure space that perpetuates in both white and Black communities in the region. George Lipsitz prescribes it necessary “to struggle in separate sites to unearth and identify the occluded and disavowed historical genealogies and ideologies of racialized space.”<sup>33</sup> While Mount Vernon remains 60 percent white and the city’s Marble Hill is currently 91 percent African American, it seems that both communities remain satisfied with those demographics.<sup>34</sup> The cobblestoned environs of Mount Vernon are firmly planted in White L, receiving coveted resources of which many Black neighborhoods could only dream. Marble Hill residents within the Black Butterfly cherish the proud history of their neighborhood and resent any efforts at gentrification that will ultimately result in displacement and the end of a thriving Black community. One and a half short miles apart, both Marble Hill neighborhoods possess demographics that are directly related to the city’s history of redlining, and both possess pure, sturdy white marble that characterizes their unique qualities. Neither desires to disrupt the purity of their respective communities with the veining of the other.

Today, there is less emphasis on maintaining the pure whiteness of marble steps in Baltimore. What was once a status symbol is now a mundane ornament from the past that has ceased to conjure the previous levels of civic pride. “Gone are the days when sidewalks were crowded on Saturday morning with women and children and their buckets, brushes, cleanser, and pumice stones.”<sup>35</sup> It is

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33 George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007), 12

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34 “Baltimore, Maryland,” DataUSA website, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/baltimore-md>

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35 Rafael Alvarez, “Era Fades Step by Step,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 27, 1996, 5



presently rare to see white marble steps scrubbed. The obsession with cleanliness and purity of white marble stairs has drastically subsided, and many boarded and abandoned homes possess gray impure steps contaminated with splotches and blemishes. While the steps are not as white as they once were, Levester Williams recognizes that “there is a recording of the city’s history within those marble stairs.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the neglect can be viewed merely as a contemporary ambivalence toward racial segregation, or merely a declining ethos in pride of place. Perhaps it is a symptom of the ongoing trauma that the citizens of Baltimore have collectively experienced over the decades. How do citizens accustomed to structural practices of racial division transform to healing practices of cooperation? Baltimore is capable of embracing the veining and forsaking the desire to scrub each other out of sight. Lawrence T. Brown advocates allowing Black residents to “heal their wounds” and overcome the structural violence of racial segregation.<sup>37</sup> These racially contested spaces reveal the legacy of discounting the humanity of Blackness, and until that obstacle is overcome, American society’s longing for purity cannot be entirely discarded.

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36 Williams, discussion with the author

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37 Brown, “Black Butterfly,” 256



Michelle Diane Wright was born and raised in Frederick, Maryland. She is the author of three books and several articles related to African American history and identity. She has written and spoken extensively on the life and work of labor leader Lucy Parsons, focusing extensively on the controversy surrounding Parsons’s ethnic identity and her rhetoric. Currently, she is working on several projects, including research for a book project tentatively titled “Shades of Hilton: An Exploration of the People of Color at the Hilton Estate,” and an examination of the life and work of Remus H. Adams, a twentieth-century free Black blacksmith of Catonsville, Maryland. Wright has also written the entire Black history of Frederick County, Maryland, and worked on several public history projects related to that research. She is professor of history and Africana studies at Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). Wright lives in Baltimore.

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Photo: Alexandra Cruz-Wright  
(photo courtesy of Michelle D. Wright)



# Levester Williams

## Biography

Levester Williams was born in 1989 in Lansing, Michigan, and raised by his maternal grandmother, Louise Williams, in Columbia, Tennessee. Williams often describes himself as being “from somewhere between a rock and the moon,” claiming that he is “simultaneously from nowhere and everywhere.” Taking the reverse route of the Great Migration from the North to the South when cities in the Midwest were faltering economically, he and his family left Michigan for Tennessee. Williams received his BFA in art and design from the University of Michigan (2013) and his MFA in sculpture and extended media from Virginia Commonwealth University (2016). He recently completed his master’s degree in computer and information technology in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences at University of Pennsylvania (2024). Williams currently lives and works in Philadelphia, a city that—like Baltimore—incorporates Cockeysville marble into its architectural and monumental landscapes.

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Photo: Sizwe Ndlovu  
(photo courtesy of Levester Williams)

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(Detail) video still of “standing ground (on Washington)” from “dreaming of a beyond: Baltimore,” filmed at the base of the Washington Monument in Baltimore in November 2023 (photo courtesy of Levester Williams)

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