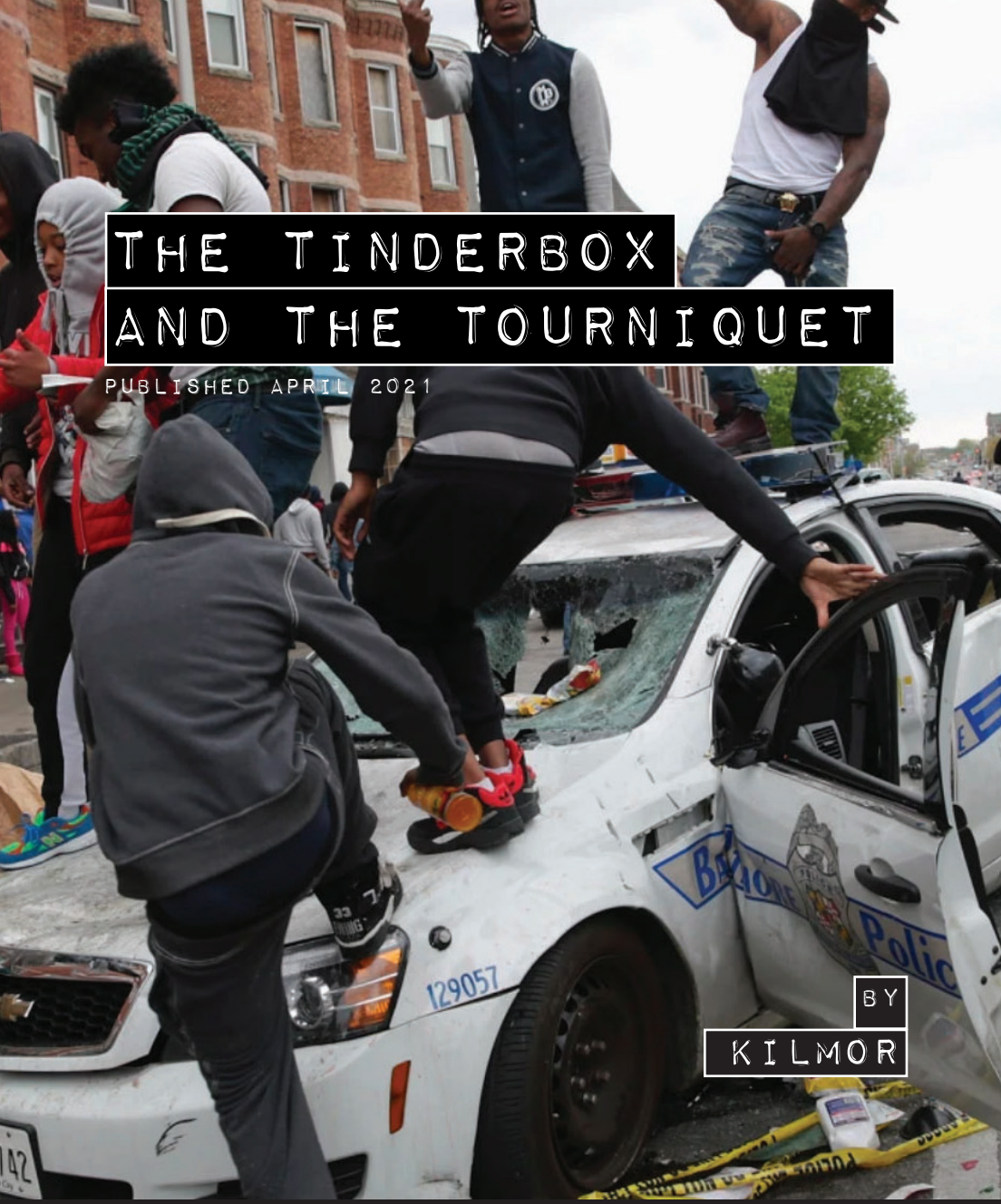

THE TINDERBOX AND THE TOURNIQUET

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BY KILMOR

VOICES FROM BALTIMORE IN THE WAKE OF THE 2015 REBELLION AND BOURGEOIS STATE INTERVENTION

In the summer of 2018, a mixture of communists and those interested in walking the revolutionary road traveled from a handful of cities across North America to meet in downtown Baltimore, Maryland for an intensive three-day social investigation into the concrete conditions of the Black proletarian masses of West Baltimore in the aftermath of the 2015 rebellion. The rebellion—a culmination of festering frustration and rage due to the dispossession that accompanies deindustrialization,[1] explicit and implicit racism, the occupation of residential areas by police known for their brutality and corruption,[2] a rampant drug economy, and regular violence—was sparked by the murder of 25-year-old Freddie Gray by members of the Baltimore Police Department (BPD).

Freddie Gray was arrested on false pretenses for the possession of an illegal knife on April 12, 2015 outside of the Gilmor Homes, a housing project in West Baltimore. Approximately 30-45 minutes after being dragged limp and screaming into a transport van, he was found unconscious and subsequently hospitalized. Between his arrest and transport, Freddie Gray suffered a number of inju-

1 Historically an industrial city known for its auto manufacturing, steel processing, transportation, and shipping through the Port of Baltimore, Baltimore experienced deindustrialization in the late 20th century and the rise of a service-based economy. The outsourcing of General Motors and the shuttering of Bethlehem Steel, among other industries, economically devastated communities that had relied on low-skill, high-wage jobs for generations and painfully demonstrated the social anarchy of capitalist production.

2 One noteworthy example of then-topical corruption was the Gun Trace Task Force, a unit of the police whose members were tried and convicted of several crimes, including assault and excessive force, extortion, falsifying evidence, robbery, and selling drugs. While indictments and arrests were not made until 2017, hundreds, if not thousands, of complaints had been filed against the unit since at least 2012, going largely ignored. Once heralded as a bright spot in the BPD's dark recent history, the Task Force was discovered to have committed crimes that were so daunting in scope and severity that they cannot be given adequate attention here. For details, see Justin Fenton, *Cops and Robbers, The Baltimore Sun*, June 12, 2019, news.baltimoresun.com/cops-and-robbers/part-one/ (accessed February 20, 2021) and Jessica Lussenhop, "When cops become robbers: Inside one of America's most corrupt police squads," BBC, April 3, 2018, bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/when_cops_become_robbers (accessed February 20, 2021).

ries, including a damaged voice box, fractured vertebrae, and his spine being 80% severed at the neck, all of which are consistent with dismissed eyewitness accounts describing him being brutalized. Kevin Moore, a neighborhood resident who recorded the arrest, described Freddie Gray being "bent like a pretzel" and "folded up like a piece of origami" by police while an officer pinned him to the ground with a knee pressed into the back of his neck.[3] Others suggested that his injuries may have been sustained or at least exacerbated by police giving him a "rough ride," the practice of driving erratically so as to inflict injury and terror on handcuffed but otherwise unrestrained prisoners during transport. While the particulars surrounding the cause of his injuries were contested, their effect was indisputable: Freddie Gray's arrest left him clinging to life while lying comatose in a hospital for a week before succumbing to his injuries.

3 "Witness on Gray's arrest: He was folded up like origami," YouTube, uploaded by Washington Post, May 3, 2015, youtube.com/watch?v=Xl4hbIiNvI0 (accessed February 20, 2021).

Freddie Gray in an undated family photo.

As he lay dying and within a week of his death, protests were organized in downtown Baltimore and outside of BPD headquarters that only flared into more open defiance on April 25, when pockets of protesters damaged police cruisers, smashed storefront and vehicle windows, and threw bottles and debris. Following Freddie Gray's funeral two days later, further police instigation provoked a more general and sustained rebellion, which led to arrests and more targeted "disappearances"[4] by authorities, the declaration of a state of emergency, the imposition of curfews, and the mobilization of the Maryland National Guard as auxiliary "peacekeepers." The flames of rebellion began to subside over the course of a week, and the National Guard began a three-day process of withdrawing its

4 Adam Withnall, "Joseph Kent: Baltimore protesters accuse police of 'kidnapping' student campaigner live on air," The Independent, April 29, 2015, independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/joseph-kent-baltimore-protesters-call-release-student-kidnapped-police-live-national-tv-10211500.html (accessed February 20, 2021).

Kids arm themselves with bricks and debris to push back occupying police. School-age youth were among the first to throw down on opening day of the rebellion. As a man we spoke with said, "That was our shorties out there."

troops from the city on May 3, during which time the state of emergency remained in effect.

A subsequent Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation, whose August 2016 findings were conveniently released just over a week after all officers were acquitted of charges relating to Gray's murder, resulted in a September 2017 consent decree with the City of Baltimore on the basis that it had discovered substantial evidence of widespread illegal and racially motivated misconduct by the BPD against the city's predominantly Black residents.[5] Both the DOJ investigation and the subsequent consent decree telegraphed a false sense of accountability and concern meant to pacify residents' smoldering resentment, promising reform through "building community trust, ...preventing discriminatory policing and excessive force," and establishing greater civilian oversight of policing, among other things.[6] Rather than wait for and swallow whole the gradual and ongoing assessments stemming from the consent decree, our team met with the resolve to go to the masses themselves and learn what, if anything, had changed three years after the rebellion and one year after the consent decree had taken effect.

Due to shifting responsibilities and subjective shortcomings, our initially intended written summation and analysis never came to fruition. However, in accordance with general communist principles and in light of *kites*' particular call for social investigations as we approach the one-year anniversary of the beginning of 2020's

5 In its Executive Summary, the DOJ's *Investigation of the Baltimore City Police Department* concedes that "BPD engages in a pattern or practice of conduct that violates the Constitution or federal law. BPD engages in a pattern or practice of: (1) making unconstitutional stops, searches, and arrests; (2) using enforcement strategies that produce severe and unjustified disparities in the rates of stops, searches and arrests of African Americans; (3) using excessive force; and (4) retaliating against people engaging in constitutionally-protected expression." For the full report, see *Investigation of the Baltimore City Police Department, The United States Department of Justice*, August 10, 2016, justice.gov/opa/file/883366/download (accessed February 2, 2021).

6 "City of Baltimore Consent Decree," *City of Baltimore*, consentdecree.baltimorecity.gov (accessed February 2, 2021).

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."[7]

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

A bust of Frederick Douglass at the Inner Harbor in Baltimore.

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.

historic wave of protest and rebellion, we feel a responsibility to revisit what we had gathered from our trip and publicize our findings. While the scope of this article may not capture the ambition and breadth envisioned back in 2018—which underscores the importance of *timely* summation—it should offer some insight into the conditions of the masses in deindustrialized cities and the strategies of the bourgeoisie to contain and let rot populations regarded as unwanted surplus through passive neglect rather than active genocidal violence.

A UNITY OF OPPOSITES: "TWO BALTIMORES"

City residents speak of "two Baltimores": one affluent and white, the other impoverished and Black. These stark economic disparities and their correlation with racial divisions are thrown into sharp relief when traveling through the arteries and collapsed veins of Baltimore's streets. Within five miles of commercial Fell's Point, a petty-bourgeois playground catering to foodies and late-night pub crawlers, and the spectacle of the Inner Harbor, the city's destination tourist trap, lies Penn North, a ghetto in the heart of West Baltimore and, alongside neighboring Mondawmin, ground zero of the 2015 rebellion. It was here, around the intersection of Pennsylvania and North Avenues, that we conducted the majority of our social investigation, having found that prolonged conversation was difficult and people were less likely to be locals in and around Mondawmin Mall,[8] a nearby commercial site and transpor-

7 Michael E. Ruane, "Experts probe an Eastern Shore site, built by freed slaves, for the nation's oldest black neighborhood," *The Washington Post*, July 25, 2013, washingtonpost.com/local/experts-probe-an-eastern-shore-site-built-by-freed-slaves-for-the-nations-oldest-black-neighborhood/2013/07/25/1301cd58-f530-11e2-a2f1-a7acf9bd5d3a_story.html (accessed February 20, 2021).

8 Mondawmin Mall was the flashpoint of the rebellion. In an acute mirroring of their everyday lives, on April 27, 2015, Frederick Douglass High School students were contained by police while trying to return home after school. Finding that the BPD had shut down the local subway stop and were forcing them to disem-

tation hub, where we originally planned to spend the majority of our time.

Penn North didn't put on airs, and its residents harbored few illusions about where and under what conditions they were living. Boarded-up and derelict row houses lined many of the neighborhood's streets, offering little value other than as potential squats or stash pads for resourceful drug addicts and dealers willing to catch a rap for breaking and entering. Graffiti and signs reading "No shoot zone" were displayed on select corners and walls in a desperate attempt to carve out areas safe from the threat of routine violence. Outside of liquor stores, a CVS pharmacy and a Subway restaurant seemed to be the only active storefronts in the immediate area, and with a dearth of local options available to us, when we would break for lunch at Subway, we were forced to eat standing

bark buses, students were kettled in and marched on by police in riot gear before pushing back by throwing projectiles. See Jenna McLaughlin and Sam Brodey, "Eyewitnesses: The Baltimore Riots Didn't Start the Way You Think, April 28, 2015, motherjones.com/politics/2015/04/how-baltimore-riots-began-mondaw-min-purge (accessed February 10, 2021).

"No shoot zone" could be found on walls all around and extending out from the intersection at Pennsylvania and North Avenues in West Baltimore. Photo by a member of our social investigation team, summer 2018.

up, as both the city and the restaurant itself had removed benches and other seating options in an effort to discourage loitering. Police cruisers occupied one, two, and sometimes all four corners of Pennsylvania and North Avenues, though seldom—if ever—did we see police leave their vehicles. Some blocks felt utterly abandoned and desolate, as though they were targets of an active airborne bombing campaign or sites of localized chemical or radiation leaks. In a word, before we even had an opportunity to speak with residents about their conditions, the environment had betrayed the fact that the neighborhood was in the grips of a crisis.

As for the people themselves, many were out and about, dodging the heat and their utility bills by engaging in conversation on stoops in the shadow of row houses, hawking incense, toiletries, and other wares, and hustling in the line of sight of police sentries. Being a multinational team of people ranging in age from our early 20s to our mid 40s, our presence was received with a mixture of mild curiosity and indifference. After all, this was an area in which most non-Black faces belonged to business owners and cops, and we seemed to meet neither of those descriptions. We introduced ourselves and, for the most part, were welcomed warmly by people who were giving of their time. "Assalam Alaikum, sister," said a man in a kufi to a comrade wearing a hijab. "Salam," we instinctively replied, as he dipped down into the Penn-North metro station.

One of our immediate questions was how the people themselves regarded the 2015 rebellion. True to the duality or "twoness" of Baltimore, it meant different things to different people, both in the heat of the moment and after the figurative and literal fires had died down. Many of the city's more petty-bourgeois residents, not to mention residents of white suburban enclaves in outlying Baltimore County, had expressed more anguish and outrage over broken storefront windows and the destruction of commercial property in the course of the rebellion than they had over Freddie Gray's broken spine and the destruction of the city's predominantly Black communities through a combination of governmental negligence and oppressive policing. For the majority of those we spoke with,

the rebellion was the logical conclusion to—or more accurately, a punctuation in—a history of harassment and violence at the hands of the BPD.

According to Mustafa, an 89-year-old West Baltimore resident, the rebellion kicked off "because the people are tired of this situation.... We've been relegated to the bottom of the totem pole." He articulated on the role of police both locally and nationally, saying, "We are disrespected by the police and always have been.... [They] seem like a force that's been put in place to keep this population in the inner city from progressing.... Police have been one of our biggest enemies; you can see it throughout the news throughout the country."

Around the time of the rebellion, Michael A. Wood, Jr., an ex-BPD officer, made national news for his frank and scathing description of police culture and psychology, which was largely in line with Mustafa's analysis. In interviews with *Slate* and *The Joe Rogan Experience* (episode #670), among others, Wood, Jr. detailed examples of casual brutality and a prevailing us-versus-them mentality while portraying police as an "occupying force" in the country's ghettos. He mentioned BPD officers being jokingly referred to as "zookeepers" tasked with keeping "animals" locked up. When speaking to why this perspective is seldom heard from within police ranks, he referred to a "blue wall of silence," an internal code and culture against reporting wrongdoing or testifying against other officers. "That's what you do in policing," Wood, Jr. said. "You're trying to do what keeps you out of trouble from all the problems that are internal. Like, I never feared the streets, but I *constantly* feared other officers."[9]

David, a man in his 40s whom we interviewed at the Mondawmin Mall bus terminal, suggested that the murder of Freddie Gray was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to police brutality in

9 "A Former Baltimore Cop Explains Why the Department Targets Black Men," *YouTube*, uploaded by *Slate*, August 12, 2015, youtube.com/watch?v=4HyKlFUM-BiA&t=680s (accessed February 20, 2021).

the area. He reflected on the then-recent unprovoked beating of DeShawn McGrier by police in East Baltimore before growing exasperated:

> This shit has been going on for years, man! That shit gets swept under the rug; there's shit you don't even know about.... The only reason why [police] got away with it then is because we didn't have no cameras. *Now*, we catch stuff on camera, [but] what about all the times we didn't have the cameras? They was killing people left and right, and the judge would say nothing about it; they let them get away with a lot of stuff....
>
> Once upon a time, policemen wanted to have respect—and they would get the respect—but now, they do stuff out of their way that make themselves look bad. So now, people don't even wanna give them no respect no more, because of the way they treat people. [Pointing south toward the Gilmor Homes housing project, where Freddie Gray was arrested]: You go up here and you arrest somebody and you try to brutalize them—beat them up and all this—when you don't have to. If somebody surrenders themselves, why would you still try to hurt them and put a knee all in their back and break the man's back and all that? And then, they getting slapped on the wrist because of it, because police protect police. *And* the courts.

As was the case when speaking with David, for most of those we interviewed brutality and corruption were less abstract concepts than they were everyday concrete realities. Abdul, a 58-year-old Baltimore native, brought up the infamous Gun Trace Task Force scandal[10] when speaking to conditions prior to the rebellion. "Police crooked as anything," he said, "setting everybody up, planting guns and drugs. And then they put it right back out here [on the street]."

Speaking more to the particularities of what sparked the rebellion, some residents made mention of the fact that Freddie Gray was a known and loved member of the community. "I think it was

10 See Footnote 2.

[the result of] a lot of stuff that was boiling up, but Freddie was well known," said Taneal, a single mother originally from Baltimore's Southside. "It had a big impact that he was taken out of our community."

Toak, a local bail bondsman who spoke with a matter-of-fact sense of authority on the neighborhood, detailed his experiences with Freddie Gray:

> I knew [him] professionally and personally. I'm the bail bondsman right here on North Ave for 25 years.... I had him out on bail on three occasions, including when he was killed. I [also] knew him from the neighborhood. When I looked out the window, you could tell who was a leader and who was following. Leaders stick out. Pepper—they called him "Pepper"—was a leader. He was a nice guy. He did what he did, but he was respectful....
>
> You got the good, the bad, and the worst. He was one of the good guys around here. He was always joking. He did what he did—they say he sold drugs—and got locked up for it a couple times, but he was an up-and-coming in the neighborhood. He didn't have any skills, but he really knew how to deal with people and [get by] in this neighborhood.

When the Masses Moved: "It's Terrible" or "It's Fine?"

With the lingering economic and housing effects of the city's 1968 rebellion in the days following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., some older West Baltimore residents saw the 2015 rebellion as foolishly impetuous. Cherie, for example, condemned its destructive aspect, saying, "I just thought it was sad that they would destroy their community because someone was killed. Whatever the situation was, why destroy your own community? I don't see any justification in burning down CVS." As if in response, many residents explained that some businesses were likely targeted for either a pattern of treating customers disrespectfully, refusing to hire locally, or both. As Najee, a brother in his 20s put it, "Some

stores have a bad reputation."

Most people who we spoke with, however, saw the rebellion in an overwhelmingly positive light. Johnny, a 32-year-old West Baltimore native, suggested that empathy for Freddie Gray was a motivating factor in people's decision to rise up just hours after his funeral was attended by thousands: "I think it was very inspiring. [Freddie's] not the first person and definitely not the last person for something like that to happen to, so a lot of people saw themselves—saw their reflection—within his situation."

"It was viewed as this big negative thing, but it really wasn't," Josiah, a 25-year-old resident, told us. He went on to speak of a sense of awe in seeing the masses in motion, describing the rebellion as "one of the most powerful things I've ever seen. After it, we became more powerful.... [It gave people] a voice. A will.... I think the uprising was just the start. The city has a voice; people have been screaming."

Like Josiah, many others detailed a momentary sense of empowerment and unity among an otherwise disempowered and fractured West Baltimore population over the course of the rebellion that stretched into the weeks and months afterward. They gave accounts of people refusing to mind their own business in the best way possible: daring to intervene in the mistreatment of others by non-community members. In the immediate wake of the rebellion, people were quicker on the draw with their cell phones in order to record police who were overstepping their authority. They were standing up for their neighbors who were being harassed or insulted by local business owners who daily extracted what little wealth there was in West Baltimore before retiring back to their homes in more "respectable" areas.

Taneal offered a complex and thoughtful response, celebrating the effect of the rebellion on the community, lamenting that it took the anger and anguish of another stolen life to inspire unity, and regretting the shift in policing strategy in the years since:

> [The rebellion] brought everyone together, and that's a good thing—that's what we need. But it still kicked out the people we really need to count on, like law enforcement and people in uniform.... It was a fucked up situation that [the rebellion] was how we had to come together. We had no choice. It should be on better terms that the community should be able to come together, not because someone got killed by a police officer. But I understand, and that made Baltimore stand out and show them that we can have each other's back. I wish we still had that today instead of shooting each other.

A Shift in Strategy: "Gunshots and Fentanyl"

The central, looming question that we sought to have answered during our social investigation was whether or not things had changed in the years following the 2015 rebellion, and if so, to what extent. By acquitting every cop implicated in Freddie Gray's murder, the city had failed the most basic litmus test regarding its capability and willingness to institute meaningful reform, but following the DOJ's damning 2016 report on the BPD and both parties' entrance into the 2017 consent decree, some held out hope that conditions could improve for Baltimore's Black proletarian population. The majority of that population knew better than to trust this federal and local partnership's self-proclaimed concern over their well-being, but few expected things to become qualitatively worse just a year into the consent decree.

Perhaps picking up on our presumptions that little, if anything, had changed for the better, many of the masses we spoke with replied with some variation of "No" when we asked whether the consent decree had made a positive impact on conditions in West Baltimore. "Ain't nothing changed [for the better]," said Tonya, a 45-year-old woman who grew up in Park Heights. "They act like they doing something in the beginning, but they go right back to the same thing."

As three high-ranking Black members of the city's bourgeois governing apparatus at the time of Freddie Gray's murder and the subsequent rebellion, Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby (above), Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake (below, left), and Baltimore Police Commissioner Anthony Batts (below, right) address the press while begging the question: Is identity-based representation in oppressive seats of power really in the interests of the masses? Above photo by Lloyd Fox, *The Baltimore Sun*; below photo by Karl Merton Ferron, *The Baltimore Sun.*

Similarly to Tonya, Johnny also mentioned some relatively superficial early undertakings—public-relations stunts such as a few community-police basketball and football games that the city ensured made it on the evening news, but when it came to real positive change, "For the city overall? No." David juxtaposed the divide between the BPD's posturing and taking real responsibility for community welfare, chalking the difference up to an institutional lack of legitimate intent to affect positive change. When we asked whether the consent decree's teased promises of reform had been carried out, let alone in a meaningful way, he responded, "No. 'Cause they lies; they not promises that they keep. They lies. They fronting—they put on a hat in front of people so [those people] think they so nice and kind and polite, but when the real stuff [like brutality, corruption, and murder] come out, they need to own it."

Penn North residents did speak to an overwhelmingly negative change implemented in the three years since the rebellion and particularly in the year since the consent decree went into effect: a laissez-faire approach to policing that allowed drug dealing and homicide to occur relatively unimpeded. As is pointed out in "Defund, Abolish...but What about Overthrow?" (available in *kites* #2), "It's not that the police became less brutal per se, but they allowed the effects of decades of unemployment, deteriorating neighborhoods, drug addiction, and the underground economy to run their course and do the work of brutalizing the people for them." Given the extent to which drug addiction and dealing were already devastating the area, not to mention Baltimore consistently having one of the highest murder rates in the country, this shift in policy was nothing short of catastrophic. "We went back to 'Bodymore, Murderland,'"[11] Najee told us.

11 "Bodymore, Murderland," a play on "Baltimore, Maryland," is a nickname the city earned for its high rates of murder and other violent crime. In the years following the rebellion, murder rates soared past their already shockingly high standards, prompting city officials and community leaders to call for days and weekends without death. Unfortunately, most of these calls went unheeded, and the streets would claim at least one body during those designated days.

"The murder rate went up since [the rebellion]," Rome, a 44-year-old West Baltimore native, said. "Nobody has respect for police no more.... [They] had it stable; people were scared of the police. But since the riots, they stopped."

It was not as though the lumpen masses caught up in "the life" of street crime became spontaneously emboldened, but that they quickly recognized that policing efforts had been significantly scaled back and began operating within the new and looser boundaries that had been established. Fly, a friend of Najee's, related that "Before the Freddie Gray situation, the police would've stopped the car, got out, [and] asked what was going on. But nowadays, I can be holding a gun to you—holding you hostage—and the police would roll right by.... They just figure, like, 'Why should we put our hands on someone? Why should I jeopardize my career?' We video recording them now, so they just avoid it all."

Abdul weighed in by providing concrete examples of the indifference-become-policy that Fly described, reporting, "People got shot out here, [and] police sat in their car. Ain't do nothing. People got robbed from their car, [and police] ain't do a damn thing.... There's a lot of violence. Six people got killed, man, around the corner in broad daylight, and whoever did it, man, ain't even run. Just stuck his gun in his pocket and just walked. The police just sat there and did nothing. Nothing." Abdul wasn't exaggerating: at least three shootings occurred in West Baltimore over the few days that our team was carrying out social investigation.

Though certainly not all, much of the violent crime that occurs in West Baltimore has its roots in the local drug economy, with rival sets all too willing to make examples of those who interfere with their business, both contenders and customers alike. Toak, for one, attributed the city's daunting rate of violent crime not only to the drug economy, but to the nature of the drugs themselves. We asked him what accounted for the uptick in violence among the people over the years. "Synthetic opiates," he responded without hesitation. "I have never seen the violence and disrespect that people

have for one another since the introduction of synthetic opiates. I've lived through the crack era. There was crack babies—[our interview was then interrupted by a hustler trying to sell us methadone]. You see that?! And look, there's a cop right there!" he said, nodding toward an officer approaching without intent from the opposite direction. "We couldn't make this stuff up!" He continued, "It's the pharmaceuticals that be driving the murders. It's the opiates. 10-15 years from now, we're gonna have opiate babies just like we had crack babies."[12]

But lest we forget, drugs alone are more than capable of producing a sizable body count, making Baltimore, a city with a history of drug problems, particularly vulnerable in the midst of the opioid epidemic and the BPD's newly relaxed policing protocols. As Najee succinctly summarized it, "They don't do nothing about drugs no more." What is worse, police had been proven to have actively contributed to their availability on the streets for at least six years prior to our visit. The following is just one such example, though it is admittedly a particularly grievous one.

At least one pharmacy was among the structures hit during the rebellion, and opportunist police got in on the action. BPD Sergeant Wayne Jenkins, supervisor of the notorious Gun Trace Task Force, absconded with two large trash bags filled with prescription drugs looted and subsequently sold on the streets.[13] In that particular case, the burning and looting of a CVS on the corner of Pennsyl-

12 It should be noted that while the crack epidemic certainly caused or exacerbated a number of social issues in Black proletarian communities throughout the US, the "crack baby" myth was essentially racist bourgeois propaganda, as studies have consistently shown that prenatal exposure to crack cocaine has little to no effect on long-term development. See Janine Jackson, "The Myth of the 'Crack Baby': Despite Research, Media Won't Give Up Idea Of 'Bio-Underclass,'" *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting*, September 1, 1998, fair.org/extra/the-myth-of-the-crack-baby (accessed February 20, 2021).

13 See Footnote 2. See also Justin Fenton, "Witness: Baltimore Gun Trace Task Force officer brought him trash bags full of looted drugs amid 2015 riot," *The Baltimore Sun*, February 2, 2018, baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bs-md-ci-gttf-day-six-20180201-story.html (accessed February 5, 2021).

vania and North Avenues, Najee's brother was set up to take the fall:

> My brother was locked up for that robbery. [Police] said there was a picture of my brother jumping across a counter and coming back with three big white containers of pills, but they found nothing in our house. He was sitting in jail for a month and a half until, finally, they looked at the video I tried to get them to look at. The video shows that me and my brother were actually sitting in my room recording the CVS in flames. [Sgt. Jenkins] started the whole thing.

Tonya expressed her misgivings about the BPD's role in suppressing the drug economy as well. "They really ain't doing their job," she said. "They hanging around the corners where people are doing what they're doing [dealing drugs], and they're not doing nothing. They may even be having a conversation with the criminals. In fact, I think they may even be involved with some of them; there some crooked cops out here."

During our many hours stretched across the three days we spent around the intersection of Pennsylvania and North Avenues, police were always within our line of sight. When we spoke to Cherie, there was only a single BPD cruiser idling on the northwest cor-

BPD officers stand guard outside of the CVS on the corner of Pennsylvania and North Avenues, which was looted during the rebellion—most notably by the BPD's own Sgt. Jenkins.

ner. "Today, ironically, there are no police out here, except for that one police car," she noted. "On an average, you see 45 police walking around, standing around. They down here all day, every day, [but] I don't really see them doing much of anything. Sometimes they go after the little drug dealers. Periodically, I've seen that. Other than that, I don't see them doing anything other than just watching."

True to form, Toak was able to provide a detailed and thorough explanation of the police response (or lack thereof) to Penn North's rampant drug problem:

> Let me tell you something: we don't have cops no more; we got monitors. They monitor the crime. For instance, [if you] walk across the street, [you would hear] "I got this, I got that. I got bupes [buprenorphine], I got percs [Percocet]."[14] They be selling their wares, and the police be sitting right in front of them, and they don't say nothing. [Pointing at an occupied BPD cruiser parked at a corner of the busiest and most conspicuous drug-dealing intersection that we saw in West Baltimore]: There you go. His lights are flashing, but he's not gonna get out the car.... They're scared for their jobs. I have seen people pouring pills into people's hands, and the police be sitting right in the car watching.

When asked to elaborate on why he thought police had become fearful of losing their jobs and adopted a more laissez-faire approach, Toak quickly answered, "The consent decree. I hate it. Kids are literally getting away with murder. I wish they would go back to...[pauses in reflection]...not to the old policing, but at least [they could] police."

Over the course of our social investigation around Penn North,

14 Buprenorphine and Percocet are both opioid medications. Even before the opioid epidemic, prescription-based opioids such as these and the cheaper, more readily available heroin had a demand in Baltimore. While the appeal of opioids is more deeply seated in the conditions under which West Baltimore residents are forced to live, their availability is due in part to Baltimore being a port city as well as the site of internationally renowned medical institutions, particularly Johns Hopkins Hospital, where opioids are rarely in short supply.

alongside the permanent presence of BPD vehicles, ambulances were a common sight. At least one shooting occurred while we were on the streets, we saw many people nodding off in the thrall of opioids, and while speaking with Toak, a man lay strewn across the sidewalk about 100 feet away, seemingly unconscious. An ambulance drove by while we were wrapping up, its sirens blaring, causing Toak to comment, "That's the second time they been here today. Gunshots and fentanyl.... Gunshots and fentanyl."

CRISIS AND DECAY: "THIS CITY DON'T TAKE CARE OF US"

In the summer of 2018, West Baltimore was in the grips of a crisis. As the beating heart of the ghetto in a deindustrialized city, it faced a litany of problems. To begin with, there were few opportunities for legitimate employment available to residents between the dearth of nearby businesses, their reluctance to hire locally due to the neighborhood's reputation, and the time and cost of traveling to areas in which there were a wider range of job options. On top of that, due to the discriminatory and overaggressive policing that was routine in the years prior to the rebellion and captured in the DOJ's 2016 investigation report, many residents had a criminal record. Patrisse, a lifelong Baltimore resident, rationalized that

It's hard for a male to find a job if they've ever been arrested, no matter what [the crime] is. It could be something small, but if they've been locked up, it's hard.... Most of the time when people get jobs, they know someone there already. If you don't know nobody, it's hard.... They always want people with experience, and a lot of the time, [people] don't have any experience or they're too young to be having experience.... [For most jobs], you usually gotta travel a long way—catch three or four buses, or catch two and walk the rest of the way.

Najee also spoke to the difficulty in securing a job when you're from an area where many earn a rap sheet even before they reach

adulthood. He linked the struggle for legitimate employment with the draw of the drug economy, identifying hustling as the primary source of income in the neighborhood:

> If you walk up and down [the streets], you see how the currency is being brought into the community [via the drug economy]. A lot of people are trying [to find legitimate work], but most jobs don't want to hire felons, [and] everyone has a past out here.... We actually try to go get a job, but when we give it our all and it don't come through, and it's stressing us out and it's crunch time, we gotta go to this last resort. And this is what you see here all day, every day.

With so many local families torn apart by drug addiction, mass incarceration, and violence, it is not uncommon for adolescents to shoulder the burden of providing for family. Working professionally with young people on the wrong side of the law, Toak displayed empathy in the course of explaining why so many get involved in the drug economy, saying, "We gotta do something with these kids going forward. All of these kids out here are trying to take care of their own families; that's why they selling drugs. You know how many people out here wake up every morning and their gas and electric is off?"

It's not only the pull of the streets that introduces new generations of adolescents to the life of hustlers and regulators, but also the push out of public programs and spaces. Austerity measures had gutted many West Baltimore services by 2018, leading Abdul to relate, "[Jobs are] nowhere. Nowhere. No jobs, no rec[reation] centers, [and] they closed the parks down. That's why everybody's on the streets."

Taneal and Rome independently echoed similar concerns, rhetorically asking what else young people are expected to do and where else they are expected to go when the education system fails them and local programs meant to cultivate and nurture other interests and skills are shut down. Taneal contrasted the options with those available in her own youth, saying, "A lot of the [recreation centers] are closed down. When I was growing up, they kept us in

basketball, dancing, ...anything to keep us off the street. Our kids don't have what we had."

"Have more programs going for the community," Rome suggested. "There ain't enough things out here for people to do. You in the ghetto. Half of us dropped out of school; all we know is the drug business."

Connected to the desolation of employment opportunities, housing was also an issue for West Baltimore residents. Even among the children and grandchildren who inherited property from families that took advantage of Baltimore's dollar homes[15] decades prior, with deindustrialization and the dispossession of manufacturing jobs, many found it almost impossible to maintain these properties, contributing to the city's characteristic panoramas of abandoned row houses. And while Baltimore had entertained revisiting the dollar homes incentive around the time of our trip, there was little draw among residents who knew that they wouldn't be able to afford the upkeep, and presumably littler still among people with means in outlying areas who have no interest in mov-

15 Baltimore's 1973 "Dollar House" program sold rundown, city-owned houses for $1 so long as people pledged to live in them for a time. It was an effort to rehabilitate properties and revitalize areas of the city that had been abandoned or had fallen into deep poverty.

Abandoned and derelict row houses are characteristic of Baltimore's ghettos.

ing into the city's deepest pockets of poverty.

Nicole, who was sharing a stoop with Najee and Fly, spoke with a combination of disdain and empathy when she described the housing situation in the neighborhood. "When people die, they leave these homes to their sorry-ass families who can't pay the taxes and water bills on them," she said. "All these people out here, their grandparents owned these places, and they left them to these motherfuckers."

Affirming Nicole's general statement with a particular example, Taneal motioned toward the row house she had appeared from, saying, "This house [my next-door neighbor] actually inherited from his great-grandma. I'm not sure if he can't get money to fix it up or if he don't have the right help or the right people to go to for it," but it had since fallen into disrepair. "He actually owns this. I'm just renting."

Finally, the most pronounced symptoms of crisis and decay were the intimidatingly high rates of death due to drug addiction and murder. While Baltimore has always vied for the nation's highest rates, they had become qualitatively worse in the years following the rebellion, in large part due to the "Ferguson effect" that saw police resort to a more passive, containment-based strategy in lieu of prevention.

"Baltimore is one of those high-risk places," Josiah lamented. "You hear the name, and you don't want to send your kids there."

Nicole spoke personally about her desperate desire not to see her son claimed by the streets. Indicative of the lack of opportunities for so many on the bottom of society, he chose to enlist in the military, which provided Nicole with some sense of relief: "My son is 17. He's starting to get a little taste of the streets, but he's going into the Army. He's got to get the hell outta here—I don't care what he does."

Speaking to the confusion and erratic behavior borne of desperate conditions, David worked through where to assign blame

when it comes to the cutthroat character of many West Baltimore youths:

> You got people out here that would do stuff to you for no reason. They don't even know why they're doing it.... You can't blame them, you gotta blame the parents for not being there—a lot of them don't have good parents, you understand? They don't have parents that will be there for them—half of them are locked up! The system putting kids' fathers in jail, so then they gonna blame kids for all the little stuff they do? No, you blame the people that put [their parents] in jail.

To paraphrase the conditions of people in West Baltimore, Taneal said, "This city don't take care of us."

DOES IT FESTER, ...OR *DOES IT EXPLODE*: "THESE PEOPLE CAN COME TOGETHER AND THERE CAN BE AN UPRISING"

Despite the myriad social issues that we came to learn about during our social investigation, policing remained our primary subject of interest. Black proletarians in deindustrialized cities like Baltimore constitute a reserve army of labor and a potentially revolutionary force, and police, as an integral part of the repressive state apparatus, largely exist to suppress that revolutionary potential. Since the 1980s, mass incarceration and the militarization of police across the country have served this strategic function. However, as was the case in Baltimore in 2015, traditional policing strategies and state repression can send sparks into the tinderbox of social contradictions, which can then erupt in the flames of rebellion, making a tourniquet-like approach a more feasible strategy. A festering appendage can be contained and left to rot, sparing the rest of the organism. Likewise, were West Baltimore simply contained and left to its own devices—a rampant drug economy and staggering murder rate—a surplus population would still be controlled while leaving bourgeois hands clean. At a future date, should there be a

demand or desire to build on and flesh out the stump left behind through development and gentrification, the city could point to the out-of-control remnants of the old population and rationalize more extreme and proactive means of displacement.

While many of the residents of West Baltimore held onto the belief that some relief from the oppression and suffering they have always known could come from representatives on high in the bourgeois state, the refrain from all whom we spoke with was that change would not come unless people come together. As rebellions often do, Baltimore's 2015 rebellion united a population in resistance against a common enemy, though only for a time. Once that enemy adapted its strategy to new, post-rebellion conditions and adopted a passive approach, old contradictions among the people were left to reconcile themselves.

The lack of local leaders with the capability and daring to unite the masses at a deeper and more thoroughgoing level demonstrates the dire need for communist organization in Baltimore and other cities facing similar trials. As Mustafa put it succinctly, "They don't want someone to come into this community that would unite these people, wake up these people, and tell these people what this is and what that is. These people can come together and there can be an uprising."

The walls of West Baltimore are a tribute to its people. Photo by our social investigation team, summer 2018.