

# The royal 'We' that owns Baltimore City

By Marcus Board

The rich get richer on the backs of Baltimore's Black communities.

If this were college sports, residents would finally be cashing in on their name, image, and likeness – but not even the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) can top the exploitation of Baltimore by Hollywood.

Millions were made off of Home Box Office's five season series (HBO) "The Wire," which delved into how everything from City Hall to back alleys operate in the City of Charm. Now, viewers worldwide are watching HBO's latest offering- "We Own This City," a tale of how the Baltimore Police Department's Gun Trace Task Force (GTTF) robbed citizens, set up drug dealers and put narcotics onto the very streets they were sworn to protect.

To this point, long-time Baltimore journalist Lisa McCray recently wrote "\$\$\$hocked" on

Twitter in response to David Simon – creator of these shows – supposed shock in learning that "cops would be robbing drug dealers and then selling the drugs to other drug dealers."

There are many more important things than the latest HBO show about the GTTF and its practices. But what continues to be relevant is how these storytellers explain the problems of oppression and - most important- how they position themselves in the narrative.

The realities of Baltimore's elected officials – scandals, coverups, indictments and all – is a glaring problem, as is the case in many cities today. Narrative matters. And local politicians moving much like police, are controlling media narratives through access and often outright lying to reinforce criminal stereotypes about everyone outside of that royal "we."

We are the state: guided by wealthy people and their aspirations, protected by police and all too often, members of the

press.

Problematic yet well-received tv shows drive home the idea that, although corruption is everywhere, the people who get paid, praised, and promoted are those who perpetuate the big lie: that Black and impoverished Baltimore communities have always been out of control and, just as important, that they are the ones protecting the rest of the good people from the chaos.

This idea of agenda-setting has come up before, explaining that Americans hate welfare because of "welfare queen" imagery used to vilify Black women; or hating refugees from "sh\*\*hole countries" and welcoming them from Ukraine; or blaming the Baltimore Uprising on "thugs" and never ever referring to anyone in the royal "we" with such racist language. This last point is one I thoroughly explore in my coming book, "Invisible Weapons."

We've all heard the narrative, "this makes us look bad" or "this isn't who we are, we're

better than that." And in spite of BPD taunting and tempting high schoolers into conflict, the truth is that the Uprising began over a week earlier with non-violent actions across the city and to very little fanfare. For me, the message cannot be any clearer: protest how they want and endure violent racism in the process so that the royal "we" can ignore you, deflect blame, and never be exposed for stealing our power.

What exactly does disempowerment look like in Baltimore? It looks like Freddie Gray's murder and the Uprising coming after years of resistance from communities that have always resisted. It looks like a city that from one administration to the next continues to add funding to the police. It looks like a perpetual rejection of radical politics, justice-oriented community organizations like Organize Black, inclusive community spaces like Dovecote Café, and artists like the Konjur Collective. This, of course, isn't to say that Black Baltimore is

unsupportive – on the contrary, these orgs, businesses, and groups are part of a thriving subset of folks who continue to push the cause of justice.

But even with this support, the majority of folks in Baltimore have yet to move to the beat of a radical drum. Moving beyond the same personal responsibility and super-predator narratives, my work focuses on the ways that the government is convincing people to reject radicalism and, in the process, deny their own anti-oppressive dreams. While that sounds bad, the consequences are often much worse. This is particularly evident in the unsung 2016 case of Korryn Gaines.

Another case for the #SayHerName campaign, Gaines was shot and killed by police in her Randallstown home after a six-hour standoff in August 2016. Police had the funding but wore no body cameras; Gaines' Instagram live stream was shut off by police working with Facebook (now Meta) just before the fatal shots.

Gaines' son Kodi was in her arms when she was killed and hit by a buckshot that first passed through his mother's body. The entire ordeal stemmed from a traffic stop.

Gaines and Gray were both made vulnerable by failing public schools, toxic exposure to lead paint, neighborhood segregation, concentrated poverty and food deserts. The royal "we" is responsible for both systemic failures and neglecting cries for systemic accountability.

*Marcus Board, is a professor of African American Studies at Georgetown University. He is publishing a book with Oxford that's coming out late next month which deals with the Uprising and the unsung county shooting of Korryn Gaines. Board's audience is grassroots Black communities, of which he has said that he has consistently been connected within and around Baltimore for some time.*

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