

Seth Eyring

Mr. Dawson Interview Analysis & Transcript

In the summer of 2012 I was invited to work on an ethnographic research team under two professors at Towson University in Baltimore County, Maryland. They were especially interested in oral histories, processes of gentrification and the transformation of neighborhood-sized communities, the political and social effects of deindustrialization in a once major East Coast shipping hub, and local HIV / AIDS outreach and treatment facilities. One of the first projects I worked on was collecting a series of interviews from people who had lived, grown up, or still live in the Sharp-Leadenhall neighborhood in South Baltimore. The interview that my partner Shane and I conducted with Mr. Dawson in the basement of Sharp-Leadenhall Baptist Church was equally memorable for his hilarious reaction to being recorded as it was for the topics that he thought we would want to hear more about.

Sharp-Leadenhall starts with a sign telling you that you have crossed a border into a “Historic Neighborhood” and, for most people familiar with the city, the neighborhood is something lost to history: a history of white flight, revitalization attempts, and racial and class tensions. Once spanning a large portion of South Baltimore, the neighborhood was demolished as part of a failed attempt to build a central highway through the city, connecting commuters with easy access to attractions like M&T Bank Stadium where the Baltimore Ravens play football. Sharp- Leadenhall is located just east and within walking distance of the Inner Harbor, Baltimore’s central tourist attraction and most familiar upper-middle class recreational area to those who live outside of the city. After being disintegrated in the name of Baltimore’s further economic development after a

long trend of population loss and economic precariousness, the lower-middle class black neighborhood could be relegated to history, continuing an even longer trend of severe economic segregation across the entire metropolitan area.

Given the success of *The Wire*, it's—still—no secret that Baltimore has had issues with security and crime. I remember safety being on the mind of many in 2012, three years before Freddie Gray was murdered by Baltimore police and subsequently turned into every parent's nightmare live on the news for the whole world to see. Despite the seemingly sudden outburst and media coverage, policing has been a constant topic in and about Baltimore City as its reputation is constantly reaffirmed by fictional television dramas, annual crime statistics, or MICA undergraduates posing for pictures in "Graffiti Alley" to post on the internet to show off their newly discovered street-cred. In the attached interview/monologue Mr. Dawson lends his opinion to an ongoing dialogue of Baltimore; the relationship of citizens, particularly black young men, to the city's police force.

Although it goes unsaid in the clip from our interview, there is a certain background knowledge that Mr. Dawson expects my partner and I to have about Baltimore, based on his knowing that we are from the area. His comments about police make more sense in the context of a continuous conversation about gang violence and high levels of drug use. Furthermore, his comments are predicated on a general understanding from everyone involved that his experience of friendliness with police in the past is in stark contrast to the situation in Baltimore at the time of our interview.

The clip is unedited and is simply Mr. Dawson's response to us asking "What was it like?" when he mentions having spent his first seventeen years living in Sharp- Leadenhall. The way that

Mr. Dawson travels from topic to topic is unsolicited by any vocal cues we gave as interviewers. His memories are always couched in the collective “we” of his neighborhood, even as he goes back and forth between his time playing as a child and getting in trouble as a child, which leads him to turn his comments to an unspoken question he assumed we would ask: “How is that different from now?” As his comments turn from a reflection on the time he was brought home by the police—nonviolently and, as he makes apparent, deservedly so—to a comparison with the present, Mr. Dawson engages in a question never asked but assumed. *Then*, police knew your parents and were a helpful and important addition to the neighborhood’s mode of discipline and care; “Policemen was our *friend*.” *Then*, the relationship between the youth and police was a “give and take thing.” *Now*, things are different. *Now*, things are not cooperative like they used to be.

One of the ways my partner and I determined that this process of remembering was happening in relation to an unspoken dialogue we were all engaging in was a comment Mr. Dawson makes early on in his monologue: “the overwhelming majority of us grew up to be contributing adults to society.” Yet again, he makes a reference to the present, aware of the dominant story about Baltimore and the way youth grow up there now. Sometimes Mr. Dawson echoes the interviews we conducted with other people in our parents’ or grandparents’ generations. There is a strong nostalgia for how things used to be and a tendency to make comparisons between their life in the past to the ways things are now, but there is a tense moment where one has to wonder why things feel like they are getting worse instead of better. Poverty, drugs, prostitution, single parents, AIDS (Maryland has the highest rate of infection with 1/49 people as of February 2016), underfunded schools, incredible incarceration rates, densely populated food deserts, an alarming homeless population despite entire blocks of empty row

homes, the lowest possible hourly wage (\$7.25). These things are not new to anyone in Baltimore, even if you are only viewing the city as a (complicit) spectator. The people we interviewed were the parents and grandparents of young, usually black, long-term residents of Baltimore and most of them have had experience with violence and police. In a way, Mr. Dawson's comments attempt to take on both sides of the story by silently addressing a problem without assigning blame. He tried to show an understanding for the intolerance of police officers, frustrated at working in a city suffering from high levels of murder, drug use, and incarceration. But he also knows the challenges of growing up in a city on the verge of bankruptcy, of entering a job market for those without a college degree that is largely temporary and concentrated in the service sector, and where neighborhoods and, with them, stability, are swept up in the interests of corporate and state building projects.

Baltimore: the city has been through a lot lately. The current generation of TV-watchers has been introduced to the city, yet again, with associations of violence and crime as seen in media like *The Wire*. Those less sensitive to the risks of painting over an entire city, already suffering from a tarnished national reputation, with yet another layer of the same claimed that everyone knew it was a fiction. A few years later, the United States watched as riots seemingly burned down the whole city in an explosion against police murders that have become all too common in a city literally referred to as "Murderland," a city that does not even tally up murders by police in the annual murder statistics report. Before 2015 had even ended, despite the city being smaller than it was in the 1990's when the last "record" was set, Baltimore City saw its highest number of murders ever. If I were to go back to Sharp-Leadenhall now and meet Mr. Dawson in his church tomorrow, would he still be answering the same questions? The ones we never asked but the ones he thought

he had to answer about the police, or about children in trouble, or, maybe the most important and most difficult question, *what happened* to Baltimore?

Mr. Dawson Interview Transcript, Sharp-Leadenhall Baptist Church

Dawson: Now, I was born here on Leadenhall Street and so when I was seventeen I left home. So I lived in this immediate vicinity for seventeen years.

(Unheard) **Interviewer:** What was it like?

Dawson: What was it like? It was great! It was fun. Have you had this, or any other type of interview like this before from people in Sharp-Leadenhall area from South Baltimore?

(Interviewers nod, indicating yes)

Dawson: We were like one big family; everybody knew everybody. It was almost like a little country town. We all knew each other and we didn't know what poverty was. While we had nothing, we were so-called "poor," everything that we had was shared. We were in and out of everybody else's house... Eatin' lunch... Eatin' dinner, when we were allowed to be away from home. But there was strict rules within families. Because everybody, every adult, any adult was mister or miss and there were no first-name-basis between children, or adolescents, and adults. It was always "speak when you're spoken to" kinda relationships that we had, you know. And if adults were talkin' *you did not interrupt*. You stood quietly by until you were recognized and allowed to speak.

(Long pause)

But that strictness was what formed the personality of all of the people that came from South Baltimore. I mean we had great pride in that most of us, the *overwhelming majority* of us, grew up to be contributing adults to society. We just had that kind of thing within us and it was banged into us and instilled into us and *any adult*, any adult in the neighborhood... like I said, we were all familiar with each other and for the most part were for the most part, one entity—one family. Any adult could correct you without *(laughter)* fear of any lawsuits or any retribution of any kind. Any adult could correct you and would! And there was two occasions where I was brought home by another adult *after* being chastised on the street. The one time I threw a rock that I shouldn't have thrown and broke a school window! And the *police* brought me home! Police officer brought me home. And I'm tellin' you this so you, you get a feel of how we lived and how we lived and how we

were brought up because... there was no fear of the police. Policemen was our *friend*. And they corrected us when we needed it and we respected them and they knew your parents. They knew our parents. And if they didn't, they just wanna know *where* do you live. And they marched us home because we were always just a stone's throw away—or, bad phrase—we were always just a little ways from home. And like two or three blocks from home would be the farthest they had to march us home. But they would always march you home and talk to your parents and straighten out whatever whatever mischief you may have gotten yourself into.

I love being raised in Baltimore. As a youth I just loved it because all we did was play ball—we played basketball for the most part. There was always a softball game goin' on somewhere—we always had lots of lots. There was always a lot some place where we could throw up three bags and find enough people to have a softball game. But I loved basketball best and we always played in the school yard and the school yard was always locked but the police me never said anything when we hopped the fence to play basketball. You know, it was kinda like a give and take thing, you know the cooperation between the young people and the police. It was just a good place to grow up. I loved it.