

America and the Beating of a Black Child

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25/06/2015

It's not surprising that a black mother in Baltimore who chased down, cursed and beat her 16-year-old son in the middle of a riot has been called a hero. In this country, when black mothers fulfill stereotypes of mammies, angry and thwarting resistance to a system designed to kill their children, they get praised.

"He gave me eye contact," Toya Graham told CBS News. "And at that point, you know, not even thinking about cameras or anything like that — that's my only son and at the end of the day, I don't want him to be a Freddie Gray. Is he the perfect boy? No he's not, but he's mine."

In other words, Graham's message to America is: I will teach my black son not to resist white supremacy so he can live.

The kind of violent discipline Graham unleashed on her son did not originate with her, or with my adoptive mother who publicly beat me when I was a child, or with the legions of black parents who equate pain with protection and love. The beatings originated with white supremacy, a history of cultural and physical violence that devalues black life at every turn. From slavery through Jim Crow, from the school-to-prison pipeline, the innocence and protection of black children has always been a dream deferred.

The problem is that Graham's actions do not assure that her son, and legions like him, will survive childhood. Recall the uncle who in 2011 posted a video recording of himself beating his teenage nephew for posting gang messages on Facebook. Acting out of love and fear for his life, he whipped the teen, but months later he was found dead anyway.

Praising Graham distracts from a hard truth: It doesn't matter how black children behave — whether they throw rocks at the police, burn a CVS, join gangs, walk home from the store with candy in their pocket, listen to rap music in a car with friends, play with a toy gun in a park, or simply make eye contact with a police officer — they risk being killed and blamed for their own deaths because black youths are rarely viewed as innocent or worthy of protection.

If there were an easy way to keep black children safe from police, out of prisons, morgues and graves, we would not have spent the past three years in an almost endless cycle of grieving the loss of young black people: Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Rekia Boyd, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray and ... and ... and ... The list is too long to fit into my word count.

This celebration of Graham reflects a belief that black youths are inherently problematic, criminal and out of control. The video also supports the idea that black fathers are absent, suggesting

that all we need is an angry black mom to beat the “thug” out of an angry young man – and everything will be fine.

What is so disturbing is that white supremacy is let off the hook. A militarized and racist police force is not the problem. Systemic racism – from the War on Drugs to racial profiling, from hyper segregation to community divestment – is not the issue. The message becomes: Black children’s behavior is the true enemy of peace.

This distracting conversation turns the spotlight back to black youth. If only Freddie hadn’t run; if only his parents had beaten him; if only he was perfect, maybe he would still be with us. And the praise of Graham reflects a belief shared across race lines that beating black children is the only way to keep them safe from the dangers of a racist society, or from stepping out of line. Rather than embracing her son Michael, rather than hearing and seeing his pain and assuring him that she’s got his back, Graham beat and shamed him in front of the world.

The public shaming and devaluing of black children has a long heritage. On Nov. 8, 1893, the *Anderson Intelligencer*, a South Carolina newspaper, reported that a black boy was caught stealing a lunch that had been left inside of a horse buggy. The locals tied the boy up in a stall and called his mother. Upon her arrival, the 200-pound mom was told of the trouble her son made. She then exclaimed, “Dar now, told you so, tank de good Lord I dun got you dis time. I bin trying to git hold of you for six munts and you git away from me ebery time. Bit I got you now, tank de Lord.”

The mother asked for a whip or cowhide, but was given a buggy trace. She stripped her son’s pants, bent him over a cross bar and beat him. The reporter noted, “Those licks and those yells were awful to hear and awfuller to behold.” And then the mother “lynched him while other humane gentlemen looked on and approved. That darkey will never steal another lunch from that stable nor any other stable.”

While Graham did not literally lynch her son Michael, she metaphorically strung him up for the world to see – in hopes of keeping him alive. We can all appreciate the pain and fear in her cry that “I don’t want my son to be a Freddie Gray.” This is every black mother’s cry heard over hundreds of years in America. From the plantation moms who whipped their kids so white masters and overseers wouldn’t more harshly do the same, to the parents during Jim Crow who beat their children to keep them safe from the Klan and lynch mobs, these beatings are the acts of a people so desperate and helpless, so terrorized and enraged, that heaping pain upon their children actually seems like a sane and viable act of parental protection.

The intensity of this fear is integral to the history of black Americans. Just as black parents have “the talk” with their children, listing survival tips for when they are confronted by white authority, black corporal punishment has been encouraged as the only way to make black children acceptable to society.

The recent killings of unarmed black people, including children, has elevated black parents’ fears and questions about how to protect their kids, and intensified debates over corporal punishment. All of this happens against the backdrop of American hypocrisy: a culture that routinely cites Martin Luther King Jr.’s embrace of nonviolence yet celebrates militarized police, corporal punishment, and the daily violence directed at black children; a culture that disempowers black parents, that criminalizes them, and blames them for everything from low graduation rates to poverty. Only hip-hop is a bigger problem if you believe people like CNN’s Don Lemon.

At the same time, American society has empowered principals who suspend and use corporal punishment, and police who wield their batons and guns to control black children.

Beatings are not transformative. They don't empower. They simply punish the victims and accelerate the trauma, bringing the pain from the streets into the home. This form of "discipline" makes children only more vulnerable to violent behavior, and increases the risk of the very behaviors that will get them in trouble at school and in the streets — the behaviors that parents think beatings will prevent.

Where is celebration of moms whose children have been at the forefront of peaceful protests? Where is the celebration of black mothers and fathers who have been organizing against police violence, against food injustice, and against the violence and looting in Baltimore and beyond? The history of the civil rights movement is one of parents and children joining together on the front lines of the struggle for justice, not one of black parents beating their children. Yet this is the image captivating the nation.

What's most tragic is that Graham said that she unleashed on her son after making eye contact with him on the street. Tragically, Freddie Gray's offense that led to his killing was that he made eye contact with police. A look from and the mere presence of black bodies leads to violence and death, and that is the real crime, which no amount of shaming or corporal punishment will fix.

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