

Uncertain Territory; The Promise and Peril of Raising a Young Man in Los Angeles

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At 6:40 most mornings, my son, Miles, catches the yellow bus to his magnet school in the Valley. The bus arrives at the MTA stop near our house, on Pico at Hauser, in Mid-City L.A. With other parents, I wait until the bus comes and he's safely on board.

Permanently memorialized on one of the benches are the words: "In Loving Memory of Laish Inreb Green, Who Loved Life and Made Sound Choices." Laish Green was three years older than my 14-year-old middle-school student when he was gunned down at this bus stop in a drive-by shooting Dec. 7, 1996.

In this city, in this era, there remain far too many ways for young black men--black folks, period--to die by violence for me to be complacent. About 10 minutes by car from our house, at La Brea and Jefferson (near where my aunt lives), LAPD Chief Bernard Parks' 20-year-old granddaughter, Lori Gonzalez, was shot and killed last May while she was in her car with a young black man, the target of a rival gang member.

Last October, a black actor named Anthony Dwain Lee was shot and killed by a black LAPD officer because he allegedly brandished a toy gun during a Halloween party in Benedict Canyon. He was shot in the back.

As my son grows into manhood, not only do I have the usual fears and frustrations of any father, I must also prepare him to deal with situations that can spiral out of control simply because of the color of his skin and how he's perceived. That no matter where he may be, he had better have his wits about him. As it was more than 30 years ago, the trick bag for black men still remains: We keep catching hell between the law and the lawless.

I grew up in South-Central. Life for me was pretty much my block of Flower Street between 59th Place and Slauson Avenue. We had KGFJ and disc jockey Magnificent Montague, three local TV channels and three national ones. When I was Miles' age, I was reading Marvel Comics (I still do, as do Miles and his sister, Chelsea), and dreaming of one day drawing and writing stories like my heroes Jack Kirby, Gil Kane and Stan Lee. Life wasn't like "Dawson's Creek"-- Watts of '65 had gone down, and I was certainly aware of the difference between the races in this big city--but it was a different South-Central in the late 1960s.

Back then, the boundaries were clearer. I vividly remember the time when me and my friend Dimitri were at Disneyland in line for the Matterhorn toboggan ride. This white kid, about 14 like me, came around the corner and nonchalantly remarked, "Oh, a couple of niggers." His older sister was obviously chagrined and pulled him away. My friend and I shrugged it off, but deep down we knew this was part of our introduction to a world that would not always be welcoming and where some would judge us before we spoke.

Since then, race relations have changed, on the whole, for the better. Living where we do, we're less than 15 minutes from the predominantly black Crenshaw District to the south and east. And we're even closer to the edges of predominantly white Beverly Hills to the north and west. My California laid-back son and daughter have friends in both areas, and Miles regularly gets on his bike to pedal to the nearby Starbucks to get his overpriced hot chocolate. For them, the city has no boundaries.

The culture doesn't either. Miles and Chelsea bob their heads to everything from the saccharine stylings of 'N Sync and 98 Degrees to the gangsta rhymings of Snoop Dogg and DMX. Miles and his friends zap zombies and annihilate 3-D aliens on machines more sophisticated than the first hoopty I drove. On the park-league basketball team he played on this past summer, the players, of various colors, all sagged on the court. That is, they wore their shorts low down on their slim hips street-fashion cool to show they were ballers with skillz. Miles--like his friends and, I suppose, like his parents-- wants to be just as hip as anyone else.

But, during a trip to Denver last fall, I had to think twice before buying him a souvenir NFL Broncos watch cap. Miles wears it like a refugee from a Dr. Seuss book, with most of the material tilting up from his head. In certain parts of the city, though, we both know that a watch cap might be misinterpreted. Kids sometimes get killed for wearing the wrong color jacket or a coveted pair of Nikes. Sometimes affectations bear a terrible price.

If that wasn't enough, I know from experience that black teenagers can and will be jacked up by the cops sometime in

their lives. And it likely will happen more than once. Miles grew a couple of inches last summer. Maybe someday he'll "fit the profile" of some other black kid spotted breaking into a home or snatching a purse outside the 7-Eleven. Or maybe it's enough that he's black and young and some cop thinks he needs a little taste of street authority-- one more lesson to learn in the big bad city.

These are rites of passage for Miles and many like him who are making their way through a Los Angeles of myriad cultures and enclaves. They must learn to navigate uncertain terrain and adopt subtle modes of conduct, from the suburban Fashion Square Mall in Sherman Oaks to Sky's Gourmet Tacos on Pico near our house to the corner carniceria near his mother's office at the nonprofit she runs in a lower-income black and Latino neighborhood near Adams and Normandie.

Just as I had to know the boundaries between the Slausons' turf and that of the Businessmen when growing up, Miles has to understand what's safe and what isn't.

But at a time when arcade games depict all manner of monster mayhem and alien gore, when our kids don't have a clue as to who wrote "The Three Musketeers" (let alone that he was part black), but can recite lines of dialogue from "Scream 3," when kiddie sites on the Internet are invaded by ads from porno portals, and Britney Spears blatantly encourages teen sexuality, where do we create the space for our kids to be kids?

For me, it's not about holding back the inevitable, but giving Miles and his sister the tools to understand the context for how these movies and records get made. I'm not going to filter out all of this because Miles and Chelsea have to make their own choices and judge the value of this stuff themselves.

Not too long from now, Miles will be driving and discovering other parts of the city. From his readings and interactions with all kinds of people, he'll understand that the world is a big, complicated and oft-times wondrous place. And no amount of my yelling, cajoling or wheedling can inform him as much as experience will.

As I said, I just want to prepare him as best I can. I can't stop a bullet like some Marvel character. But for now, I can wait with Miles in the morning. It makes me feel useful.

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: (no caption); PHOTOGRAPHER: Shana Cassidy

Credit: Gary Phillips has written eight crime novels, including the upcoming "Tyson," a novella about pit bull fighting. This is his first essay for the magazine

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