



The Darker the Berry, The Sweeter the Juice.

Acrylic on canvas. 198.1 × 161.3 cm. ©2015 Henry Taylor. Image courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe.

Still Occupied

my report on the safety of my sons

Karen D. Taylor

This arrogant autonomy, which is guaranteed the police, not only in New York, by the most powerful forces in American life . . . creates a situation which is as close to anarchy as it already, visibly, is close to martial law.

—JAMES BALDWIN, “A Report from Occupied Territory” (1966)

MY SONS HAD no idea that I silently chanted words every time they stepped out of the door. I still do, when they come to visit, but less fervently now. Maybe it’s because they are grown men, though this reason is irrational, because there is really no place they can go where they are safe, whatever their age.

The way I saw it: If I repeated a litany three times, one after the other, my sons would make it home, so that I wouldn’t be left bereft, staring at fading pictures of their boyish faces, trying to figure out how they would look with a salt-and-pepper mustache or fine wrinkles creasing their foreheads from many years of living.

When they were youngsters, I gazed at their backs as they left for school, a party, their job, to take the garbage out, chanting in my head: *Ancestors. Jesus. Obatala. Buddha. Allah. Somebody. Anybody. Everybody. Y’all listen to me now! I beg of you. Please keep them safe in one piece. Bring them back to me with all of their faculties, unharmed. Please do not let the cops kill them. Please do not let the gangbangers kill them. Your daughter needs you here, Ancestors. I thank you. I thank you. I thank you. With all the life I have in me, I thank you. Please help me, Ancestors. Please don’t abandon me.*

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My sons, my African American, brown sons, Chenzira Imani Malcolm Taylor-Lewis and Siyaka Paul Taylor-Lewis, were neither killed nor maimed by the gangs of Washington Heights or Harlem or Brooklyn, and I am certain that my magical intoning was no more magical than

that of the mothers who lost their sons. Chenzira and Siyaka were never beaten or shot by the police, and I would not dare consider them or me to be lucky, either. Any more than I would consider Trayvon, or Sybrina and Tracey, his parents, unlucky; or seven-year-old Aiyana, who died in her grandmother's arms, shot by a cop filming his debut in a reality show about Detroit law enforcement. The litany is long and seemingly endless, but here are some of the Black men that the police have killed, since I began writing this piece: Walter Scott, Darrell Lawrence Brown, and Freddie Gray.

From the time they were around six or seven, I began telling my children about the police. Sometimes I feel guilty that they are forced to go through "law-enforcement rites of passage" that may make them brittle and insecure. The only other people who have to go through this are Latinos of a certain complexion and Native Americans. No white people's children have to go through this, unless they are Black. What did I call myself doing? I've often wondered why I thought bringing Black children into the world was a good idea. For them and for me. I've tried to calm the pounding in my chest on those days or evenings when my sons were a little late. I chanted those words that could only be silenced by the sound of keys in the door, allowing me to breathe again—for that moment.

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There would be very little space in my life for me to sit passively, peacefully, because the hatred that's reserved for my Black folk is unrelenting. Since I had children, knowing full well that I birthed them into hostile territory, I had to make sure that they would love themselves and our people. I had to tell Chenzira and Siyaka that their brown beings placed them in peril with the police. I had to preemptively destroy the horrendous messages that they would hear about us, themselves, their ancestors. I needed to make sure that if they internalized anything, it would be the beauty I saw in them, and not the images meant to diminish them as men, as human beings. I've heard that children believe everything their mothers tell them about themselves, so my words had to be even stronger than love. My words would have to sustain my sons forever. My words had to be powerful lessons that would allow my sons to become a reflection of my strongest hopes for their survival and thriving.

My lessons were also conflicting. I said, "If you ever get lost, find a policeman," and, "the cops don't like Black boys. They are not your friends, even if they smile and speak nicely to you. If you ever get stopped by the police, be polite. Be very conscious that you don't make any sudden moves, and let them know exactly what your moves will be.

If you have to go into your pocket to get your wallet, say, 'I am going into my pocket to get my wallet.' Don't answer any questions, except for who you are." All of their lives, I have been telling my sons to manifest Hands Up! Don't Shoot! Hands Up! Don't Shoot! when they are accosted by the police. I also told them that silence is their right. I implored them: Please don't get into any trouble, because once the white folks get their hands on you, there will be very little I can do to help you. Black mothers have lived through this for too long. It's got to have some effect on our health, whether we are in the ghetto as I am, or in tony places like Buckhead in Atlanta, Georgia; or those African American, middle-class enclaves, Ft. Washington, Maryland, or its neighbor up the road, Upper Marlboro.

We pray, have ritualized thoughts that calm us down a little bit, so that we don't have nervous breakdowns from worrying when our sons go out. Every family that has Black males in it has the talk that begins, "This is what to do when the cops stop you." The talk we give them repeatedly is the long version of Hands Up! Don't Shoot!

By the time they were teens, they viewed the police with the appropriate degree of fear. White mothers don't have to go through this, unless their sons are Black or criminals, and even then, white criminals are afforded more respect by the police than innocent Black men. Witness sixteen-year-old Ethan Couch, who killed four people with his car while he was drunk. He was acquitted because he was afflicted by the "affluenza," caused by his rich parents, who never disciplined him in any way. No cop beat him, maimed him, killed him, or even pointed a weapon at him. He was perceived as a human being, but for his Black or brown brethren, such a merciful consideration would not have even been a notion.

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In the early 1990s, most school days, I rolled Siyaka in his stroller down St. Nicholas Avenue to meet Chenzira on the corner where the school bus stopped, near the fish place by 145th Street. There used to be a newsstand right next to the subway entrance. As I stood there, a red-haired cop gave chase to a young man who seemed to be unarmed. The young man zoomed past me, a smile on his brown face, and ran down the steps into the train station. I looked nothing like him. Our only commonality was that we are both African American. A few seconds later, the officer, running, came to a dead halt when he saw me.

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Ronnie Mack: I Grew to Love. Acrylic on canvas. Two parts; 177.8 × 149.9 cm each. ©2015 Henry Taylor. Image courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe.

Initially he thought I was his suspect, and aimed his gun, point-blank, right between my eyes. Had I moved an inch, I would most likely have gotten a bullet right between my eyes. Killed in front of my sons. Maybe Siyaka would have been splattered with my blood as he sat in his stroller unaware of exactly what was going on. What was the redhead doing, running thorough Harlem, his gun drawn, when the streets were full of children coming from school—some alone, some with schoolmates, some with their parents and grandparents? Should I have reported him to the 30th Precinct? “The Dirty 30” as it was called, was overrun by drug-dealing cops and had its own problems. Who was I supposed to tell down at that stationhouse that one of their officers came very close to killing me? Who there would have cared? I was spared the fate of death at the hands of “mistaken identity.” I’m still here today only because there was something in his being that allowed him to “see” me. I surely cannot say what the something was. Could it have been his humanity? His training? But with his gun in his hand, he bolted down the stairs, and who knows if he would have shot his “suspect.” I had no idea if this red-headed menace would come back upstairs, shooting, so I pulled Siyaka in his stroller down to the ground, saw Chenzira’s yellow school bus let him off, and hollered for him to get down. All of this happened in less than sixty seconds.

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When he was ten, Siyaka, fed up with living in Harlem/Washington Heights, said to me, “With all due respect, Ma, this is no place to raise children.” It was the best I could do after we moved from an apartment in Jamaica Estates, Queens. I lost my work, collected unemployment, and when it ran out, I went to the department of social services for help.

Siyaka is my natural mystic. He will come into the house, vibe the energies for a moment, then say, smiling “It feels good in here, Ma.” Sometimes when he looks at me, it seems that he’s trying to focus his third eye. Sometimes the eyes he uses to look at me appear odd, glinting with a light that can look either like lunacy or like he has a very powerful observational sense, which he does. He’s a photographer. One of his photos is of the night sky, heavy with opaque clouds covering a shimmering moon. He called that one “Self-Portrait.”

On the roof of our building that sits on a hill, there is a panoramic view of the Bronx, downtown Manhattan, Queens, and New Jersey. He and a friend were having a photo shoot up there one afternoon. Probably informed by the new, white tenants, who may have been peeking through their shades and were frightened by the sight of two Black males, two cops emerged from the roof’s entry door, demanding that Siyaka and his friend kneel and place their hands on their heads. I am glad that the officers did not mistake Siyaka’s \$1,500 camera for a gun.

This is why I understand Toya Graham, who beat her son Michael on national television as he went to confront the Baltimore PD. She saw him throwing stones. I saw three seconds of the video that captured her slapping him. She did it because she was afraid for his life. She and I have seen very clearly how cops get away with murder, because they are expected to kill Black people for the slightest infraction or for nothing at all, apparently. I do not know Toya, but I wish there were a sister circle to embrace her and help her understand that, at a certain point, oppressed, children, who have no power, but want to be free, equal, and treated like humans throw stones. Children in West Baltimore throw stones just like the children in the West Bank, like the children in South Africa—Sharpeville, Soweto. But for Michael throwing stones is not the only thing that placed him in danger. Toya is wrong if she thinks beating him into passivity, in public, will save him, her, or the people of West Baltimore. Those young hands throwing stones backed the police up all the way down the street. They have the power to make the police retreat, figuratively and literally. To change the order of things. Toya and I have been stressed by raising children in dangerous places, but we

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My chant, three times, accompanied by my perfectly focused gaze upon their spines at the middle point between their shoulder blades: I believed I could stare into creation a force field around Chenzira and Siyaka's hearts, their entire bodies, that could not be breached by the NYPD and the gangs.

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Once, when Chenzira was stopped by an officer, he was calm, and referred to him as sir, which infuriated the officer, who said, "Oh, so you're being polite, hunh?"

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My eldest. As he walks through his life, up St. Nicholas or Edgecombe to visit me or wherever he goes, I think his travels should be accompanied by Isaac Hayes's "Shaft," looped with James Brown singing he "walks like he has the only loving left." My godchild, Atiyya, and Chen were hanging out in Washington Square Park, and, suddenly, Chen stopped, struck a pose on a huge rock. Atiyya asked him what he was doing. He said, "I'm imagining how the waves in my hair look with the sun shining on them." Chen's personal "Shaft" soundtrack, with James's exclamation of pure self love, "jump back, I wanna kiss myself. Good God!" is total insight into Chenzira's mind.

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Many years ago at the Million Youth March on Malcolm X Boulevard, Chen was walking a few feet ahead of me. A phalanx of five cops, strolling abreast walked toward us as we moved through the throngs. He was a teenager then, and between his looks and his walk, his bearing enraged one police officer so much that his brow furrowed and his face flushed. I had a clear view of the officer as he looked at Chen. It seemed the officer would have loved to knock the cocky out of that

Black N-word, walking around like he thinks he's somebody. My son. My Chenben. My baby child I used to call Little Papi Lew. None of my pet names for him would have meant a damn thing to that man in blue. Chen would have gone into the man's "demon" category that officer Darren Wilson reserved for Black men: He justified killing Michael Brown, because Mike looked like a "big, Black demon."

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Chenzira said that he does not even feel safe in his own home.

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Of course Black women are stopped and frisked, too. Alexa Birdsong was one of James Baldwin's students, when he taught at Amherst. Alexa is a big deal in show business, producing concerts and such in New York, New Orleans, overseas. She's also on Community Board 11 in Central Harlem. Alexa, was stopped and frisked two days in a row on her way to the bodega, which is a few feet from her front door, When they stopped her the second night, her question to them was, "Didn't y'all just do this yesterday?"

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Siyaka, as I instructed, said to the officers that stopped and frisked him, "I am going into my pocket to take my ID out." This was Siyaka's version of Hands Up! Don't Shoot! Hands Up! Don't Shoot!

"Why are you telling us this?"

"Because people get shot."

The cops found this to be hilarious and let Siyaka go.

And all of this at my son's expense. At my expense. At the African American community's expense.

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Everywhere I go, nowadays, I find myself praying over other people's Black children, husbands, wives. Chanting words in my head for people I don't even know. Walking along Third Avenue in the Boogie Down Bronx, I saw a young brother all dressed in red: sweatpants, sweatshirt, with his hood on his head. His locks cascaded down his torso to his



Noah was here and obviously Thelma too.

Acrylic on canvas. 191.8 × 159 cm. ©2014 Henry Taylor. Image courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe.

waist. He is my son. When I thought of what could befall that young man, I decided that he needed to know he is beautiful. That was the most I could offer him that day. “Your locks look so nice and perfect,” I said to him, as I rushed along.

He said, “Thank you very much, ma’am, and so do yours. I like that cut.” “Thanks,” I said. We locked eyes. Words filled my head: *Ancestors, somebody, anybody. Get him home safely, and if he’s a Blood, let there be a truce so that all the gangbangng knuckleheads can figure out what to do about their real enemies.*

“Your baby is so cute,” I told a teenager, “take good care of her.” The mother smiled, thanked me, moved on, texting with one hand and pushing the stroller with the other. I chant a faithless woman’s prayer that that infant’s future is full of hope and dreams that are never thwarted: May she never have to throw rocks.

. . .

On the Deegan Expressway, driving along, my brain was engaged at my relatively normal state. No chanting, repetition, magical incantations, pleadings. Then I turned the radio to 1010 WINS to hear the traffic. The newscaster said that Baltimore was burning. That there was an uprising going on. That seven cops were hurt and the gangs were allegedly trying to organize themselves to come together instead of giving their community a hard way to go with all that killing and drug running and craziness like what the show, “The Wire,” portrayed. Somebody made a whole bunch of money big pimping B’More’s Black poor and the fallout of the drug trade. Did any of them give the people who lived real, impoverished lives a dime? I know not one of the people throwing rocks at the po-po or slapping the hell out of their child or looting the CVS or cleaning up the city in the aftermath made any money from that show.

For months thousands of young people demonstrating have been peaceful, protesting with signs and slogans, their hands up surrendering. Don’t Shoot! For months thousands of young people have laid their bodies down on the ground, chanting, “I can’t breathe.” For centuries Black America has been saying Hands Up! Don’t Shoot! What does Black Lives Matter mean and to whom is it addressed? The police? The judicial system? The white citizens of this country who will

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magically change their minds about being white supremacists, because they will be hypnotized when the phrase is repeated over and over?

I am tired of all of the variations of Hands Up! Don't Shoot! Black Lives Matter! Over the centuries and decades, Black people in this country have surrendered, begged, marched, and capitulated. The thing I have learned is that the country has only responded to our uprisings, and I don't know if Chenzira or Siyaka will ever take to the streets to throw stones, but there is one thing I do know. If they did, their mother would, likely, join them. 🌐