



Department of English  
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Prof. Khayati

### Black men and public space

#### Brent Staples

- Born in 1951.
- Grew up in Chester, PA—a large family. In the essay, Staples talks about ‘the small angry industrial town’ with ‘a backdrop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murders.’
- Blake (a brother)—a drug dealer, murdered at 22.
- Attended the University of Chicago.
- Autobiography: *Parallel Time: Growing up in Black and White*. In the essay ‘Black Men and Public Space,’ Staples remembers his childhood in Chester, Pennsylvania, where there is ‘gang warfare, street knifings, and murders.’ Many of his friends and family have gone to prison or have been killed over. The author, however, talks himself as ‘a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken’, meaning that he is a harmless person.

#### Historical Context: the 1980s

- Urban decay—social and physical deterioration of the inner city: ‘otherwise mean, impoverished neighborhood’ from this essay; life in the Ghetto.
- The number of African Americans living in inner urban centers increased, with low income households.
- Many African Americans were unable to complete college.
- Racism and the association of blackness with crime.

## Stereotyping the back other

Brent Staples succeeds greatly in demonstrating the current negative view of black men in America and the fact that racism is still alive today. He finds himself in awkward and embarrassing situations, when he realizes that wherever he goes he causes fear to white people; at the same time he becomes aware that as a black man he is constantly exposed to unfair treatment on the part of white people, because the latter always act on the widely accepted stereotype that associates blackness with crime.

In this essay, Staples describes how he has always been discriminated against for being a black journalist in a white area of work. He first realizes this as a graduate student when he takes a walk late at night and frightens a white woman who believed he was following her. The girl might have a right to be fearful of strangers in the street, but the fact that he is the cause of the fear and that he has this rather odd quality to change the environment around him perturb him deeply.

He describes other occasions when people unreasonably mistake black men for what they are not: as a journalist in Chicago, he went into the office of a magazine to hand in a story but was mistaken as a burglar by the office manager; he explains a time when he entered a jewelry store to write an article for a newspaper and was greeted with an “enormous red Doberman pinscher;” on another occasion, a colleague of his was mistaken as a killer. These examples begin to make the reader feel sympathy towards black men in general and the prejudice they cannot escape in public space.

## Style and imagery

Staples uses much vivid imagery to help his readers imagine the situations he has to cope with. The image of Staples barely being able to “**take a knife to a raw chicken**” shows readers that he is in fact a harmless person. Also, Staples describes white women who walk the street at night as seeming to “**forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled.**” The women are intensely protecting themselves from black men whom they do not know based solely on stereotypes. These images help the reader to fully grasp the depth of Staples’s experience. His diction portrays this tactic from the very beginning of his essay. Staples states that his “**first victim was a woman**” causing many readers to make the hasty and ready-made assumption that he would assail or hurt this woman, but ironically it is Staples who becomes victim to widespread prejudice against blackness as a symbol of crime.

Staples uses comparisons to enhance the descriptions of the fear that others feel by Staples’s presence. He explains that the woman’s quick getaway when she saw him on a street at night made him feel like “**an accomplice in tyranny**” that was “**indistinguishable from the muggers.**” This experience shows how the woman’s racism affected her own actions but also how it negatively influenced the black man emotionally. He also uses **onomatopoeia** to recreate the atmosphere of walking the streets at night when he says he “could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the **thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk** of the driver-black, white, male, or female-hammering down the door locks.” The sound of the cars locking creates an uneasy feeling among readers and shows the extent of precaution that white Americans took as a result of his presence.

## Changing public space

Staples, however, will not let this stereotype of being a threat to society overcome his emotions. To transform the public space around him positively, he whistles classical music to assure others that he is not a perilous man and that they should not fear him. Through these actions, he suppresses the personal notions of feeling like a thug while also lessening the aspect of terror felt by nearby people. The whistling allows him to positively change the public space around him.