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Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Void of Black Men: A Response to Brent Staples "Black Men and Public Space"

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I'll never forget the time when I got called a nigger --- standing numb and flabbergasted by the vulgar language the old white lady used, I watched as she dashed away from the gas station as if she had just committed a crime. I was twelve years young when I stood outside the gas station pumping gas; my dad had gone inside to use the restroom. I successfully pumped the gas, but I didn't know how to get my receipt. I asked the elderly lady next to me for her help. She looked at me and saw nothing but my blackness and without hesitation claimed that she doesn't talk to "my kind". Knowing full and well what she was alluding to, I politely asked her what that meant, because in my naive mind, there was no way such a person could be so overt with their prejudice --- I was wrong. Her racist mindset manifested the false reality that just because of the color of my skin, I was less of human then her --- that is the reason she responded to my question with "I don't talk to you niggers".

At a very young age, I came to understand that my identity in the presence of others can alter public space. At only twelve years old, decades removed from the era of Jim Crow, Malcolm, and Martin, I understood that my identity was at times seen as a weapon --- a stimulus that can trigger the minds of people who see me as less than human. I have become weary of the fact that I have such abilities, and in result, it has shaped how I try to appear in public. Internally, it has made me feel vulnerable, like there is a void in the center of my person that pulls in the worst from people who see me as less than what I'm truly worth. With that comes a mixture of anger and sadness, yet also a sense of confusion as to why this is the way of life as a black kid, and how unfair it feels to be disadvantaged because of a part of me I can't control. Reflecting on the times in my life when I altered public space, it is shocking how such experiences can come with unanticipated consequences both with the outside world and one's own personal psyche.

A few years later, I found myself in an elevator with a young white lady and her two kids. I had left my hotel room to get a drink and, in that moment, in that elevator, I felt like I had all six eyes focused on me. It felt as if my identity as a black teenager was amplified because of the behavioral response of everyone in that space which shifted once I entered. The mother stopped talking about whatever it was she was talking about and abruptly pulled her two kids closer and gave me a look of fear and anxiety, like at any moment I would try to snatch her purse or harm her kids. Being in that situation by yourself, the feeling of self-consciousness consumes your entire body. My 6'2" frame felt that sense of uneasiness from which I had caused with my presence. That alienation I felt made me think about how her own children saw me. They couldn't be any older than eight years old, but it makes me wonder what kinds of thoughts enter the minds of these young and impressionable kids, who were witnessing their mother shutdown at the sight of blackness. It makes me wonder if there is a possible indirect consequence that spawns from the mother's reaction. Is it possible that her kids will learn to behave the same way she did, causing the cycle of fear provoked by black men to continue into the next generation?

I mentioned how alienation in moments when a black man alters public space can cause one to become more self-aware of their own identity. The same is true when you're with a group of people who look like you. I recall the time myself and four of my black teammates entered a gas station to pick up our midnight snacks. We all were wearing our red warm-ups which was enough to trigger the mind of the clerk who was working that night. He asked us if we were in a gang, and if we indeed were, he was fully willing to call the police and have us arrested, he claimed. I assured the clerk we weren't any sort of gang bangers, but my curiosity got the best of me because I asked him politely why he thought we were. He told me and my friends that the fact we were all wearing the same red warm-ups made him think we were representing the bloods and looking to shop lift or worse. I couldn't be any older than thirteen, yet I suddenly became aware that we were being profiled by color. This time not only by the color of our skin, but in addition, the color of our clothing which in his mind made us complete thugs. Looking back

on that moment, it made me understand that there are layers to altering public space as a black man, and how at the roots, the stereotypes of black men perpetuate through the minds of people who see black people as less.

After that experience and flirting with the language of fear during my younger years, I began to comprehend to what extent stereotypes can affect the external responses of other people. I had a friend who lived in Chicago. He was the type of kid that most other kids and adults respected because of his mature demeanor. He wasn't only the captain of his basketball team, but he was also remarkable in the classroom. People looked at this young man and saw a bright kid with a well-mannered head on his shoulders. On his way home from school one day, the local police department only saw a black teen. At only fourteen years old, he was harassed by law enforcement. They suspected him of having illegal drugs with no evidence. Their suspicions of him were rooted in stereotypes that a black teenage boy walking on the sidewalk had to be some sort of druggie polluting the streets. I feel remorse talking about my friend because he tells me how much that one day changed his life, and how for his own safety, he feels it is essential that he acts with a more passive nature so that a situation like this never happens again.

Stereotypes have plagued the minds of ignorant people who put down others for their race. My father had a situation when he altered public space, but in a way that was unorthodox compared to the many examples I have heard from other black people. My father was engaged in everyday lunch banter with his coworkers, years before I was even born. It is beyond comprehension how this typical lunch setting turned to an open space where men could talk about their blatant racist views in front of my father. They talked about how any time their own children would participate in what I like to call "hood rat activities" such as slashing tires, my dad's coworkers said they would tell law enforcement that it was the black boys of the neighborhood who committed such acts since in their minds, they were less than their own white boys and they deserved the blame since they fit the stereotype. Realizing they were having this discussion in front of a black man, one of the coworkers told my father he shouldn't be offended since they considered him "African" and not "black American" since he has roots from his home country of Cameroon. It's simply ironic how even though these men know my father, and they knew he was a good man, they still were able to be racist with him because they didn't see him as black. The fact that they knew him didn't stop them from being overtly racist, rather, it was the fact that they didn't even identify my father as black that he was able to alter that public space in a way that allowed these men to spread their racist rhetoric.

Over the years, I have learned to suppress the frustrations of my raw and angry emotions. As a result, I have become more self-aware of myself in certain environments which has caused me to act with a more precautious manner. The overt racism that I have experienced in my life has also caused me to be more aware about things with myself. I am proud to be black and I have no shame with how hateful people react towards me. Reflecting on these experiences makes me understand why I always asked them to clarify what they are actually saying. It is because I'm waiting for one old lady, or one racist coworker to justify their hatred --- they never can. My identity in the presence of racism is simply a stimulus to the false reality these racist people live in. I'm not responsible for hatred, and all the feelings of uneasiness and discomfort that comes from these situations, rooted in stereotypes, are my own way of taking a step into my own black psyche and understanding to what extent I can alter the perceptions of people around me. That void at the center of my person in reality has the ability to bring out the best of people within a public space.