

Just walk on by: a
black man ponders
his power to alter
public space



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Brent Staples' essay titled 'Just walk on by: A black man ponders his power to alter public space' is an outstanding piece of minority literature of the twentieth century. Not only is the essay a high quality literary work, the point the author makes is also highly relevant to blacks and other ethnic minorities. Through the course of the essay, the author makes several valid observations and poignant remarks about the injustices meted out to blacks in everyday social situations. He rightly expresses his indignation at deep-rooted prejudice and the occasional hatred that blacks are subjected to. This aspect of his essay is not unique, for minority literature in America is full of such themes. But what makes Staples' essay stand out from the rest is his proposed solution for the problem. Instead of adopting a radical standpoint of aggressive confrontation or even militant retaliation against racial injustices, Brent Staples attempts to see the problem from White Americans' perspective and goes out of his way to ease their concerns (Staples, 1986). This is indeed a unique standpoint in the context of black and minority literature. While the logic employed by the author might come across as weak and his attitude might seem submissive, it takes a lot of courage and a big heart for a person from a minority community (that has historically been treated unjustly) to reach out and offer an olive branch. The rest of this essay will elucidate further reasons for why this is so and will argue in support of the author's position.

Looking back at the history of racial reconciliation in the United States, it is fair to say that pacifist leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. have left a more enduring legacy than militant ones such as Malcolm X. In more contemporary times, the analogy could be extended to intellectuals such as

Cornell West as against vociferous ethno-religious leaders such as Louis Farrakhan. While both sides have sound logical arguments to support their case, it is always the cool and balanced analysis of the pacifist, non-violent leaders that wins through. The same assessment is applicable to Brent Staples' position, which is based on balanced and nuanced analysis and one that is bound to fructify into peaceful reconciliation. Moreover, while identifying the rationale for black male aggression, Staples also hints at its basic flaws:

“ Many things go into the making of a young thug. One of those things is the consummation of the male romance with the power to intimidate... I recall the points at which some of my boyhood friends were finally seduced by the perception of themselves as tough guys. When a mark cowered and surrendered his money without resistance, myth and reality merged-and paid off. It is, after all, only manly to embrace the power to frighten and intimidate. We, as men, are not supposed to give an inch of our lane on the highway; we are to seize the fighter's edge in work and in play and even in love; we are to be valiant in the face of hostile forces.” (Staples, 1986)

While the above observation comes from his own personal experiences, Staples' essay is also meritorious for its consideration of the opposing view point. In this case it is the reference to Norman Podhoretz' controversial 1963 essay titled ' My Negro Problem - And Ours'. Despite the apparent racist tone on the essay, Staples does refer to some valid observations made by Podhoretz. For example, Staples concurs with his fellow scholar in recognizing the “ special brand of paranoid touchiness” that black males have come to represent (Staples, 1986). The only problem with Staples' <https://assignbuster.com/just-walk-on-by-a-black-man-ponders-his-power-to-alter-public-space/>

perusal of Podhoretz' views is its convenient stereotyping of all black males, for it is blatantly unfair to categorize an entire community as suffering from paranoid touchiness. But beyond this small weakness in his argument, there is much veracity behind many of the essay's claims.

And finally, in what is a display of literary irony, the so-called "power to alter public space" leads the author to alter his private thoughts and behavior.

When prejudices expressed by the white majority are so deeply-engrained for it to be dissipated overnight, a more practical solution is called for. In what are the most memorable last lines from the essay, the author tells his audience how he has learnt to convert tense situations into amicable ones. He tells how his adoption of a compassionate posture in the public space has transformed his personal experiences. While not being didactic about his method, there is an element of earnest recommendation in his words:

"I began to take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening. I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours, particularly when I have exchanged business clothes for jeans...I have been calm and congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by the police. And on late-evening constitutionals along streets less traveled by, I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers... Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn't be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's Four Seasons. It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they are in bear country." (Staples, 1986)

Reference:

Just walk on by: A black man ponders his power to alter public space. By: Staples, Brent. Literary Cavalcade, Sep98, Vol. 50 Issue 5, p38, 4p.

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