

Black men and public space essay sample

Society



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In a society as culturally diverse as the one we live in, you would think that people would learn to be more accepting of others. Nevertheless, there are still those who simply cannot. In his essay *Black Men and Public Space*, Brent Staples describes something that most young black men experience on more than one occasion in their lives. Being perceived as a criminal simply based on his “unwieldy inheritance”, the color of their skin.

Staples recalls his experience as a 22-year-old graduate student away from home for the first time. His first “victim”, as he puts it, was a young white woman who practically runs down the street when she sees him walking down the same street behind her. It is ironic that he calls this woman his victim when in reality it is Staples who was the victim in the situation. He had done nothing that deserved such mistreatment. He is the victim of her prejudice. She was the one that was wrong in her judgment of him. He thought that there was enough of a distance between them but it was obvious that it was his appearance that scared the woman away. After all, he was a young black man, 6 feet 2 inches with a beard and billowing hair walking the streets of Hyde Park, a predominantly white neighborhood, with both hands in the pockets of his military jacket. This when he realizes the power he possessed. The power to alter public spaces by simply being black.

Staples notices the sounds of car doors being locked as he passes by, the women who clutch their purses closer to them, or the storeowner who watches him closely and brings her Doberman out front when he enters her jewelry store. The encounters he has had with cab drivers, doormen, and police officers who assume that he is out looking for trouble. He is even mistaken for a burglar at his own job. Young African American and Latino

men all over the country face this everyday. There is a popular misconception that they are violent thugs and gang members and should be feared. All because of the way they look, they are perceived to be criminals.

He is uncomfortable with the fact that someone becomes frightened by his appearance. He is embarrassed and frustrated that he is being misjudged based on his appearance alone. He realizes that being recognized as dangerous was also unsafe for him especially if the person feeling threatened is carrying a weapon. And these days when there are more and more police shootings of unarmed men it is especially scary. He explains, “ Where fear and weapons meet- and they often do in urban America- there is always the possibility of death.”.

Instead of becoming angry and resentful towards those who fear him, he has taken certain measures to make himself seem less threatening to others. He makes sure that he has left a safe distance from others when he is on the subway and on the street. If he is about to enter the same building with someone who looks a little nervous he lets them clear the lobby before he goes in. He remains calm and extremely polite when pulled over by the police. He also whistles melodies from Vivaldi and Beethoven hoping that it would make others around him more comfortable. He figures no one would expect a mugger to whistle classical music. He claims, “ It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country”. For his own safety, he has learned to deal with the way society sees him. And even though it may not change everyone’s perception of black men in public, he may be able to change someone’s mind.