

Final Composition

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Due Thursday by 11:59pm **Points** 100 **Submitting** a file upload
Available after Jul 22 at 12am

We live in a society that is deeply divided. We have divisions of race, class, gender, age, religion, and even a person's physical abilities. For this composition, I would like for you to go introspectively and honestly look at your own biases. Explore when was the first time you were made to realize that you were part of a race. Did that realization change the way you saw others? Do you find yourself now holding onto ideas that your grandparents instilled in you as a child about race? Create an argument that allows you to be honest about what you know, and write a composition about that. Follow the rules below, and this will be your final composition.

Please consider the readings below. You will need to write a thesis driven, argumentative essay (don't panic! You've been doing this all along). You will need to have an introduction paragraph, complete with a thesis statement. Three body paragraphs: first is your argument, second is a counter-argument, and third is a rebuttal (goes back to your argument). And finally, a conclusion paragraph. The first and third body paragraphs will need to have one quote each. One from each article. Determine which quote will go in what body paragraph (one or three).

For the final composition, you will write a composition that is between 500 to 600 words in the format of a five paragraph essay. You will need to follow several steps, so make sure that you plan this out.

Step 1: Read and annotate "[Black Men in Public Spaces](https://1.cdn.edl.io/gRYcQIJjaTKmNGvXM9P1yQ7Tj5K1PIQuPU9meVPHkmz4ma0h.pdf) (<https://1.cdn.edl.io/gRYcQIJjaTKmNGvXM9P1yQ7Tj5K1PIQuPU9meVPHkmz4ma0h.pdf>)" by Brent Staples

Step 2: Read and annotate "[As Black as we Wish to Be](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/as-black-as-we-wish-to-be.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/as-black-as-we-wish-to-be.html>)" By Thomas Chatterton Williams

Step 3: Prewrite on your topic

Step 4: Pull two quotes from the articles. One from each

Step 5: First Draft of final *HINT: follow the outlines I have provided for previous compositions.

Step 6: Let the draft breath at least a day

Step 7: Edit/revise

Step 8: Submit Second Draft for grading

Step 9: Congratulate yourself! You are done!

Black Men and Public Space

by Brent Staples

Brent Staples (b. 1951) earned his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Chicago and went on to become a journalist. The following essay originally appeared in Ms. Magazine in 1986, under the title, "Just Walk on By." Staples revised it slightly for publication in Harper's a year later under the present title.

My first victim was a white woman, well dressed, probably in her early twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago. As I swung onto the avenue behind her, there seemed to be a discreet, uninflamatory distance between us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her, the youngish black man – a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket – seemed menacingly close. After a few more quick glimpses, she picked up her pace and was soon running in earnest. Within seconds she disappeared into a cross street.

That was more than a decade ago. I was twenty-two years old, a graduate student newly arrived at the University of Chicago. It was in the echo of that terrified woman's footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into – the ability to alter public space in ugly ways. It was clear that she thought herself the quarry of a mugger, a rapist, or worse. Suffering a bout of insomnia, however, I was stalking sleep, not defenseless wayfarers. As a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken – let alone hold one to a person's throat – I was surprised, embarrassed, and dismayed all at once. Her flight made me feel like an accomplice in tyranny. It also made it clear that I was indistinguishable from the muggers who occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto. That first encounter, and those that followed, signified that a vast, unnerving gulf lay between nighttime pedestrians – particularly women – and me. And soon I gathered that being perceived as dangerous is a

hazard in itself. I only needed to turn a corner into a dicey situation, or crowd some frightened, armed person in a foyer somewhere, or make an errant move after being pulled over by a policeman. Where fear and weapons meet – and they often do in urban America – there is always the possibility of death.

In that first year, my first away from my hometown, I was to become thoroughly familiar with the language of fear. At dark, shadowy intersections, I could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the thunk, thunk, thunk of the driver – black, white, male, or female – hammering down the door locks. On less traveled streets after dark, I grew accustomed to but never comfortable with people crossing to the other side of the street rather than pass me. Then there were the standard unpleasanties with policemen, doormen, bouncers, cabdrivers, and others whose business it is to screen out troublesome individuals before there is any nastiness.

I moved to New York nearly two years ago, and I have remained an avid night walker. In central Manhattan, the near-constant crowd cover minimizes tense one-one-one street encounters. Elsewhere, in Soho, for example, where sidewalks are narrow and tightly spaced buildings shut out the sky – things can get very taut indeed.

After dark, on the warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where I live, I often see women who fear the worst from me. They seem to have set their faces on neutral, and with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier-style, they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled. I understand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination. Women are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black men are drastically overrepresented among the perpetrators of that violence. Yet these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

It is not altogether clear to me how I reached the ripe old age of twenty-two without being conscious of the lethality nighttime pedestrians attributed to me. Perhaps it was because in Chester, Pennsylvania, the small, angry industrial town where I came of age in the 1960's, I was scarcely noticeable against the backdrop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murders. I grew up one of the good boys, had perhaps a

half-dozen fist fights. In retrospect, my shyness of combat has clear sources.

As a boy, I saw countless tough guys locked away; I have since buried several too. There were babies, really – a teenage cousin, a brother of twenty-two, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties – all gone down in episodes of bravado played out on the streets. I came to doubt the virtues of intimidation early on. I chose, perhaps unconsciously, to remain a shadow – timid, but a survivor.

The fearsomeness mistakenly attributed to me in public places often has a perilous flavor. The most frightening of these confusions occurred in the late 1970's and early 1980's, when I worked as a journalist in Chicago. One day, rushing into the office of a magazine I was writing for with a deadline story in hand, I was mistaken as a burglar. The office manager called security and, with an ad hoc posse, pursued me through the labyrinthine halls, nearly to my editor's door. I had no way of proving who I was. I could only move briskly toward the company of someone who knew me.

Another time I was on assignment for a local paper and killing time before an interview. I entered a jewelry store on a city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous red Doberman Pinscher straining at the end of a leash. She stood, the dog extended toward me, silent to my questions, her eyes bulging nearly out of her head. I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her goodnight.

Relatively speaking, however, I never fared as badly as another black male journalist. He went to nearby Waukegan, Illinois, a couple of summers ago to work on a story about a murderer who was born there. Mistaking the reporter for the killer, police officers hauled him from his car at gunpoint and but for his press credentials, would probably have tried to book him. Such episodes are not uncommon. Black men trade tales like this all the time.

Over the years, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness. I now 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. If I happen to be entering a building behind some people who appear skittish, I may walk by, letting them clear the lobby before I return, so as not to seem to be following them. I have been calm and extremely congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by the police.

And, on late-evening constitutional 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. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune. 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 know they are in bear country.

Writing Prompt:

Summarize the claim Brent Staples makes in "Black Men and Public Spaces" and analyze and evaluate that claim, explaining your position on the issue using evidence from your reading, research, and experience.

Word Bank

- **Summary:** *using few words to give the most important information about a topic*
- **Claim:** *to say that (something) is true or factual*
- **Analyze:** *to study (something) closely and carefully; to learn the nature and relationship of the parts of (something) by a close and careful examination*
- **Evaluate:** *to judge the value or condition of (someone or something) in a careful and thoughtful way*
- **Position:** *a point of view; a side of an argument or viewpoint*

The New York Times

SundayReview | OPINION

As Black as We Wish to Be

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS MARCH 16, 2012

Paris

MY first encounter with my own blackness occurred in the checkout line at the grocery store. I was horsing around with my older brother, as bored children sometimes do. My blond-haired, blue-eyed mother, exasperated and trying hard to count out her cash and coupons in peace, wheeled around furiously and commanded us both to be still. When she finished scolding us, an older white woman standing nearby leaned over and whispered sympathetically: “It must be so tough adopting those kids from the ghetto.”

The thought that two tawny-skinned bundles of stress with Afros could have emerged from my mother’s womb never crossed the lady’s mind. That was in the early 1980s, when the sight of interracial families like mine was still an oddity, even in a New Jersey suburb within commuting distance from Manhattan. What strikes me most today is that despite how insulting the woman’s remark was, we could nonetheless all agree on one thing: my brother and I were black.

Now we inhabit a vastly different landscape in which mixing is increasingly on display. In just three decades, as a new Pew Research Center study shows, the

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member of their immediate family or a close relative is currently married to someone of a different race. Thanks to these unions and the offspring they've produced, we take for granted contradictions that would have raised eyebrows in the past.

As a society, we are re-evaluating what such contradictions mean. The idea that a person can be both black and white — and at the same time neither — is novel in America.

Until the year 2000, the census didn't even recognize citizens as belonging to more than one racial group. And yet, so rapid has the change been that just 10 years later, when Barack Obama marked the "Black, African Am., or Negro," box on his 2010 census form, many people wondered why he left it at that.

If today we've become freer to concoct our own identities, to check the "white" box or write in "multiracial" on the form, the question then forces itself upon us: are there better or worse choices to be made?

I believe there are. Mixed-race blacks have an ethical obligation to identify as black — and interracial couples share a similar moral imperative to inculcate certain ideas of black heritage and racial identity in their mixed-race children, regardless of how they look.

The reason is simple. Despite the tremendous societal progress these recent changes in attitude reveal in a country that enslaved its black inhabitants until 1865, and kept them formally segregated and denied them basic civil rights until 1964, we do not yet live in an America that fully embodies its founding ideals of social and political justice.

As the example of President Obama demonstrates par excellence, the black community can and does benefit directly from the contributions and continued allegiance of its mixed-race members, and it benefits in ways that far outweigh the private joys of freer self-expression.

We tend to paint the past only in extremes, as having been either categorically

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the racist logic of previous eras — specifically the idea that the purity and value of whiteness can be tainted by even “one drop” of black blood. And yet, however offensive those one-drop policies may appear today, that offensiveness alone doesn’t strip the reasoning behind them of all descriptive truth.

In fleeing from this familiar way of thinking about race, we sidestep the reality that a new multiracial community could flourish and evolve at black America’s expense. Indeed, the cost of mixed-race blacks deciding to turn away could be huge.

With the number of Americans identifying as both black and white having more than doubled in the first decade of this century — from 785,000 to 1.8 million — such demographic shifts are bound to shape social policy decisions, playing a role in the setting and reassessing of national priorities at a time when Washington is overwhelmed with debt obligations and forced to weigh special interests and entitlement programs against each other.

Consider the impact that a broad redefinition of blackness might have on the nation’s public school system. In the past few years, the federal government has implemented new guidelines for counting race and ethnicity, which for the first time allow students to indicate if they are “two or more races.”

That shift is expected to change the way test scores are categorized, altering racial disparities and affecting funding for education programs. For this reason and others, the N.A.A.C.P. and some black members of Congress have expressed concern that African-Americans are at risk of being undercounted as blacks compete more than ever with other minorities and immigrants for limited resources and influence.

Scholars have long maintained that race is merely a social construct, not something fixed into our nature, yet this insight hasn’t made it any less of a factor in our lives. If we no longer participate in a society in which the presence of black blood renders a person black, then racial self-identification becomes a matter of individual will.

And where the will is involved, the question of ethics arises. At a moment when

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the multiracial ether, what happens to that core of black people who cannot or do not want to do either?

Could this new racial gerrymandering result in that historically stigmatized group's further stigmatization? Do a million innocuous personal decisions end up having one destructive cumulative effect?

LAST year, I married a white woman from France; the only thing that shocked people was that she is French. This stands in stark contrast to my parents' fraught experience less than 10 years after the landmark 1967 case *Loving v. Virginia* overturned anti-miscegenation laws. It is no longer radical for people like my wife and me to come together.

According to the Pew report, while 9 percent of white newlyweds in 2010 took nonwhite spouses, some 17 percent of black newlyweds, and nearly one-quarter of black males in particular, married outside the race. Numbers like these have made multiracial Americans the fastest-growing demographic in the country. Exhortations to stick with one's own, however well intentioned, won't be able to change that.

When I think about what my parents endured — the stares, the comments, the little things that really do take a toll — I am grateful for a society in which I may marry whomever I please and that decision is treated as mundane. Still, as I envision rearing my own kids with my blond-haired, blue-eyed wife, I'm afraid that when my future children — who may very well look white — contemplate themselves in the mirror, this same society, for the first time in its history, will encourage them not to recognize their grandfather's face.

For this fear and many others, science and sociology are powerless to console me — nor can they delineate a clear line in the sand beyond which identifying as black becomes absurd.

Whenever I ask myself what blackness means to me, I am struck by the parallels that exist between my predicament and that of many Western Jews, who struggle with questions of assimilation at a time when marrying outside the faith is common.

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came before us?” For Judt, it was his debt to the past alone that established his identity.

Or as Ralph Ellison explained — and I hope my children will read him carefully because they will have to make up their own minds: “Being a Negro American involves a *willed* (who wills to be a Negro? I do!) affirmation of self as against all outside pressures.” And even “those white Negroes,” as he called them, “are Negroes too — if they wish to be.”

And so I will teach my children that they, too, are black — regardless of what anyone else may say — so long as they remember and wish to be.

The author of “Losing My Cool: Love, Literature and a Black Man’s Escape from the Crowd.”

A version of this op-ed appears in print on March 18, 2012, on Page SR5 of the New York edition with the headline: As Black as We Wish to Be.

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