

THE ART OF CONFRONTING STEREOTYPES

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My first victim was a woman,” begins Brent Staples: “white, well dressed, probably in her late twenties” (153). Although to Staples the distance between them seems “discreet” and “uninflammatory,” to the woman, he—a young black man “six feet two inches” tall with a “beard and billowing hair”—is uncomfortably, “menacingly close” (153). Within moments, she is “running in earnest” and disappears into a cross street (153). This interaction sets the scene for Staples’s “Just Walk On By,” an essay that takes a compelling look at the physical and psychological challenges brought about by an aspect of Staples’s identity that he has no control over whatsoever—the color of his skin. On the empty streets of Chicago and New York, he encounters women who brace themselves in his presence, pedestrians who cross to the other side of the street to avoid him, and drivers who lock their doors indiscreetly as he approaches. History rears its hideous head as Staples, shackled to an “unwieldy inheritance,” struggles with his “ability to alter public space in ugly ways” (153). The fear that the people around him exhibit is almost instinctual, and in extreme circumstances can lead to savage consequences: “where fear and weapons meet . . . there is always the possibility of death” (153). Staples concludes from his experiences that “being perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself.”

There is an overwhelming sense that Staples, not the “white, well dressed” woman, is the true victim of these interactions (153). He is constantly subjected to the judgment of others based on his race, and though he agrees that their concerns are valid, it offers “no solace against . . . the alienation that comes of being ever the suspect” (154). Susan Brownmiller echoes this inner conflict in her essay “Femininity,” a discourse on the unhealthy emphasis placed on how women should behave in order to gain the approval of others. According to Brownmiller, there is a “minutely, demandingly concrete . . . rigid code of appearance and behavior” defining femininity that has

been imposed on women everywhere (205). In light of such harshly unyielding expectations, women are faced with a dilemma. To go against the grain would be to surrender one's female identity, but to accept it is to voluntarily submit to what Brownmiller considers "masculine" dependence (207). Those who fail to comply are deemed "unattractive," stripped of their pride and effectively "disquali[fied]" from the pursuit of their birthright (206). "Failure," she concludes, "looms in either direction" (207).

Nevertheless, even women who find it difficult to satisfy "femininity's demands" will cling to them as a "desperate strategy of appeasement," a strategy they "may not have the wish or courage to abandon" (207). Women would rather hide behind a mask that rewards them with acceptance and approval than face a lifetime of rejection. In Staples's terms, femininity can be described as the oppressive "unwieldy inheritance" of the female gender. Women are victimized and ostracized by the perception of who they ought to be.

As demonstrated in both Staples's and Brownmiller's essays, discrimination can lead to the alienation of individuals and even groups, fueling the fire of animosity between the people who misunderstand and the people who are misunderstood. A community thrives upon the cohesive mentality of its inhabitants. Without a sense of security or belonging, a community is severely weakened. According to a theory proposed by Abraham Maslow in his paper "A Theory of Human Motivation," there are five stages of human growth. They can only be achieved in chronological order, the first being the development of fundamental physical needs and the last being intellectual self-fulfillment. Stereotyping greatly affects the third of these five stages—"Belongingness," the need to feel accepted within a group (380). Without a sense of belonging, Maslow argues that a person will not reach the last two stages—self-esteem, which is the "desire for a stable, firmly based, (usually) high evaluation of themselves," and self-actualization, which is "the desire for self-fulfillment" (381, 382). Not belonging can lead to "cases of maladjustment and more severe psychopathology" (381). In fact, Maslow concludes that "a basically thwarted man may actually be defined as a 'sick' man" (395). In a society where mental well-being is a keystone to success, failure to rise above one's needs for belonging to more intellectual pursuits due to discrimination can have long-term negative effects on a community as a whole. How, then, does one effectively impact unhealthy norms and stereotypes so deeply ingrained in society?

The answer may lie in how people in history have radically altered the notions of institutional traditions. In his masterpiece *Les Demoiselles*

d'Avignon, Pablo Picasso confronts tradition through a visual medium. It is apparent at first glance that Picasso's style is far from realistic. The nude women in his oil painting are portrayed with abstract, angular postures and vaguely menacing faces, as if challenging the viewer to stare back at them. Confrontational and even somewhat masculine, these women are far removed from stereotypical depictions of the female form. Picasso's renderings seem garishly primitive in comparison to the works of Leonardo Da Vinci or Michelangelo. Indeed, in the years following *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*'s first showing, many art scholars were highly critical of his work. In an editorial concerning Picasso's legacy published in 1973—the year Picasso died—*The Burlington Magazine* noted that Picasso remained a divisive figure throughout his life. Citing letters written in response to a *Times* review of a 1945 exhibition of Picasso's wartime paintings, one correspondent remarked in horror that Picasso's art “is an insidious growth which, if left unchecked, will sap the roots of all that is fine in painting.” To another, it seemed that “Señor Picasso's painting cannot be intelligently discussed in the terms used of the civilized masters” (“Fetch Me” 489). Even so, his image eventually transformed from that of a “dangerous revolutionary” into a “genius capable of engendering affection as well as respect” (489).

Today, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is widely considered a groundbreaking masterpiece of the Cubist movement—a movement that changed the very definition of what is considered “art” by dissecting and reconstructing subjects based on essence rather than appearance. In “Michel Leiris on Knowing,” art historian Charles Palermo quotes Surrealist writer Michel Leiris in positing that Picasso's success may lie in his ability to harness “presence,” which is the capacity of a work of art to “communicate to a reader or beholder” the relationship between the artist and what he sees “before his eyes or in his head” (828). In Palermo's words, “presence” allows us to “know the author's intentions by reading or looking at his or her work.” Stripped of the “coldness of so-called objectivity,” *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is able to confront the establishment and influence its audience through “a large share of subjectivity,” placing focus on essence instead of stereotypes of femininity (Palermo 828). Where words would surely have failed, Picasso's art did not.

Still, to confront tradition as boldly and as radically as Picasso did can trigger severe repercussions if met with an unwilling public. Staples knows this. He recognizes the risks involved with direct attacks, citing “a teenage cousin, a brother of twenty-two, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties” as unfortunate victims to “episodes of bravado” (154). Instead of acting directly, Staples takes precautions to make himself “less threatening,” such as giving a

“wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms” (155). He discovers that his practice of whistling classical tunes at night reduces tension, wordlessly communicating to his peers, “I am an educated, cultured man. You are safe here.” Eventually, even “steely New Yorkers hunching toward night time destinations seem to relax” (155). But despite his small victories, Staples falls short of his desire to feel accepted within society. Staples remarks with grim realization that after everything he has done, his behavior is still guided by racial victimization. Whistling is simply his “equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear . . . in bear country” (155). Maslow points out that a man whose need to belong is not gratified “will strive with great intensity” to achieve it (381). Staples, it seems, is no different.

As actions, Staples’s nuanced confrontations are fleeting ones—easy to overlook in the daily hustle and bustle of the cityscape. But by wielding his pen the same way Picasso would a paintbrush on canvas, all of his thoughts and actions suddenly become tangible pieces of his “presence,” immortalized through the art of the written word. While in reality Staples may remain “a shadow,” “timid, but a survivor,” within the pages of “Just Walk On By” he transforms into an unrelenting activist, confronting the world through his craft in ways simply whistling could not (154). Thus, by allowing others to perceive his world through his eyes, he elicits their sympathy and understanding and consequently creates an opportunity for him and for his peers to leave behind the stereotype that has made them victims for so long and move beyond their Maslovian desire to belong.

Picasso’s success in harnessing “presence” and Staples’s literary activism suggest that art may play a pivotal role in unseating the stereotypes that plague our society. We often think that the most influential method of persuasion is through the spoken word, but there is something unexpectedly personal about a work of art that cannot be achieved through a debate or speech. The way that a work of art is created, meticulously, lovingly, passionately—as if its realization demands for the artist’s total surrender to his craft—is especially humbling in the wake of a topic as charged as racism or sexism. Perhaps through art, African Americans can finally leave behind their “cowbells,” and women can exercise their freedom of identity. Perhaps one day, we will recognize that above all, being human is a reason for celebration, not segregation.

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