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On the Outside: Cultural Outliers, Responsibility, and the Concept of Home

All people are familiar with the concept of home. For most, it is a place where they always feel comfortable, welcome, and wanted. Millions from all corners of the world call the United States of America home. While some Americans are welcomed with open arms, others are outsiders, shunned for their differences. For those unwilling or unable to change, home feels nonexistent and responsibility for it is placed in the victims' laps. In her essay "The 'F Word,'" Firoozeh Dumas, an Iranian American writer, takes the reader on her journey from childhood to adulthood in a culture that sees her as a perpetual foreigner. As a child, she starts using an American first name instead of her Persian name and comes to realize there are both advantages and disadvantages to assimilating in this fashion. Brent Staples, an African American writer, is also a perpetual outsider in America. In his essay "Black Men and Public Space," Staples shares his experiences as a young Black man trying to make his way in the 1970s and 1980s. Due to persistent racism and stereotypes, he feels the need to change his behavior to mitigate the discomfort and fear he triggers in various environments and people. In the country they call home, Firoozeh Dumas and Brent Staples are cultural outsiders who are routinely reminded of their perceived otherness, able to affect the mood of their environments, and feel a need to change aspects of who they are.

Throughout their essays, Firoozeh Dumas and Brent Staples underscore how they are regularly othered and reminded that they do not belong in America. In some outdated contexts,

the United States of America is viewed as a melting pot where people of many races, ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures meld together to create one homogenous culture that is embraced by all. There are some, though, who argue that this melting pot encourages assimilation into acceptable American culture, stripping its citizens of the ethnic and cultural differences that make them unique and beautiful. The pressure to assimilate in America is persistent and extreme, the consequences for not doing so alienating and hurtful. In her essay “The ‘F Word,’” Dumas states, “I wanted...a name that didn’t come with a built-in inquisition as to when and why I had moved to America and how was it that I spoke English without an accent and was I planning on going back and what did I think of America?” (63). The constant questioning others Dumas makes her feel like a permanent outsider because of her Persian first name and what many Americans believe its foreignness indicates. Similarly, Staples speaks to the loneliness and isolation of, without question, being labeled a criminal on the prowl because he is a Black man walking in his neighborhood at night. Though he acknowledges that the women he encounters at night are “particularly vulnerable to street violence,” he admits that, “...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” (Staples 140). Once again, the distancing behaviors of many Americans place Staples outside of the inner circle’s lines, leaving him feeling hurt and alone. Only this time, it is due to his race, gender, and the perceived danger. A person’s race or ethnicity are a permanent part of them, something that cannot be changed. Therefore, for those with racial or ethnic differences, the message is always clear: they do not belong and are not wanted here.

Firoozeh Dumas and Brent Staples discovered they can also impact people and environments for the worse by existing as they are. Public spaces are open to everyone. One

cannot claim public space as their own and create rules that bar others from safely utilizing that space. However, Dumas and Staples are either threatened to be, or actually, booted out of spaces due to American culture's refusal to accept people with cultural or racial differences. After adopting the unmistakably American name Julie, Dumas comes to understand that even though it has its benefits, she still can affect people in powerful, negative ways. She reveals that after being privy to her childhood friends' real feelings about those "damn I-raynians," she realizes that if they were to find out her real name, they would never allow her to occupy space in their lives or homes due to her Iranian heritage (Dumas 65). The threat of being kicked out of a space for simply being herself follows Dumas wherever she goes. It is only when she goes out of her way to deny or alter parts of herself to suit the cultural norm that she can avoid prejudice. In the same vein, the crux of Brent Staples' essay is that, due to his race and gender, he has the "ability to alter the public space in ugly ways" (139). In one example of this phenomenon, he writes, "At dark, shadowy intersections, I could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the think, think, think, think of the driver-black, white, male, or female-hammering down the door locks" (Staples 140). In another example, he shares that a White jewelry attendant excuses herself upon his entering the shop, only to return with a large, menacing dog (Staples 141). People of all genders and races fear Brent Staples being in their vicinity because of his race and popular stereotypes about Black men. The shift in atmosphere from comfort to unease is automatic, the assumption being that he will rob them, harm them, or worse based solely on his race and gender (Staples 140). As a result of these assumptions, Dumas and Staples are frequently made to feel they are at fault for their status as cultural pariahs and that it is their responsibility to fix it.

The most unsettling result of experiencing an onslaught of xenophobia and racism is that Firoozeh Dumas and Brent Staples both feel a need to modify parts of who they are. As stated before, assimilation is considered a cornerstone of American culture. Those who live in the United States are expected to behave in ways that make the predominant culture and race as comfortable as possible. It is seen as the person of color and immigrant's responsibility to go out of their way to do so. Choosing not to is often met with resistance and could result in everything from blatant disrespect to even death. Understandably, Dumas adds a new American name: "I finally chose the name 'Julie' mainly for its simplicity. My brothers, Farid and Farshid, thought that adding an American name was totally stupid. They later became Fred and Sean" (64). Dumas modifies an integral part of who she is to present a "simpler," more palatable version of herself by American standards. Even her brothers, who initially balked at the idea, eventually succumb to the pressure to conform. Likewise, Staples changes his behavior so that he is less threatening to those who fear him. He shares, "And on late-evening constitutionals I employ what has proven to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi...It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country" (Staples 141). Staples employs behavioral changes to lessen fear in those around him, reasoning that no one suspects danger of someone whistling classical tunes. Although some may recoil at the idea, Staples chooses to alter his behavior in the name of self-preservation. Being met with such hostility on a regular basis would surely cause anyone to question who they are and ask what they can do to lessen such an unfavorable response to their presence. Systemic racism and xenophobia leave Dumas and Staples feeling as though they are the problem, and it is their job to find a solution. In reality, they are the vulnerable ones, and it is the culture that needs to change.

People of color and immigrants in America are often left out in the cold when they are the most in need of a place to call home. Like an unwanted solicitor, the front door is quickly slammed in their faces with a loud and clear message that they are not welcome here. In a country founded on the principles of liberty, justice, and equality for all, every human being has the right to be who they are and live without fear of alienation, derision, or death. Instead, Firoozeh Dumas and Brent Staples are American citizens who are denied the safety, security and comfort many Americans who fit the ideal enjoy, with the blame placed at Dumas's and Staples' feet. Throughout their lives, they are repeatedly told they are unlike the favored majority, detrimentally affect the world around them, and need to modify who they are to fit in. Responsibility for correcting injustice grounded in racism and xenophobia is not for the victims of that injustice to solve. It must be taken by those least susceptible to that injustice, thus making America a place every person can genuinely call home.

Works Cited

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