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Why the Son Ran Away

The “Runaway Son” by Brent Staples is a part of his memoir, Parallel Time: Growing Up in Black and White. This recollection describes how he left his responsibilities behind and now has such overbearing guilt that every time he sees an unattended child, he feels obligated to go and “rescue” the child. It is easy to say that Staples was a coward for leaving his family. However, there are numerous factors that play into the reason he left. Growing up, Staples faced various hardships that caused him to lose his innocent identity. He was parenting his siblings at the age of ten. He no longer was a child, but instead he became a mother. The fact that he was subjected to a role of a mother is the most prominent reason that he chooses to escape. Staples had such a difficult time understanding his subjectivity that he resorted to his only option, running away from the problem.

“Runaway Son” explores how the issue of identity leads to explaining why Staples felt justified in leaving his family. Identity is always something that troubles young adults. They do not know how to fit into the crowds at school and get along with their parents. However, in this story Staples seems to start having an identity crisis from the age of ten. He did not have a normal childhood. He was forced to think about complicated things such as identity at a very young age. The interesting part of this recollection is that we can examine Staples’ identity issues at many different stages of his life. By understanding how his identity was confusing to him, we can later assess why his subjectivity caused him to leave.

When Staples was a boy he faced some problems that caused him to doubt his identity. His father had raging fits; he knew he could never truly rely on his father for anything. “On Saturday night my father raged through the house hurling things at the walls. Sunday morning

would find him placid, freshly shaven....I craved his attention but I was wary of him; it was never clear who he would be.” (Staples 361). While he was still a child he saw that his own father did not know what he was doing with himself. He saw this this father could be both a violent drunk and a placid man in consecutive days. Staples grew up with his father teaching him that there was not anything strange with having multiple identities meshed together. “Ten years later those possibilities had all been exhausted. He was knee-deep in children, married to a woman he no longer loved...The children were coming fast. We were three, then five, then nine.” (Staples 361). Staples makes it very clear that his father was not able to handle his responsibilities. The key factor here is that children, numerous children, were the problem. It all became too overwhelming for his father, so his father in a sense, checked out of reality. He just lived with his mid-life identity crisis. He was not able to connect with, love, or even truly care about his children. Staples’ father’s actions really took a toll on Staples psychologically. The saying “like father, like son” may apply here. However, the reason Staples ran away was not simply because he realized he was inevitably going to be like his father, not his mother. There was more to the Staples’ departure than just a messed up father.

Another reason Staples had such a difficult time understanding his identity was because of the settings around him. He grew up in a volatile environment. He describes his first house as a place he could not trust. “I grew up in a household on the verge of collapse, the threat of eviction ever present, the utilities subject to cutoff at any moment.” (Staples 361). His house was a place that he could know he could not rely on. His house did not let him feel safe or secure. He could not associate his home as a good place to just be a kid. He realized from a young age that he could not just be a normal kid living in a normal home. His house was literally dark because there was no electricity. But, in Staples’ mind, his house figuratively represented darkness in his

life. He could not allow himself to be a carefree child because of this overwhelming darkness. He had younger siblings, that he wanted to look out for, but realized he could not while being in such an unstable environment. When Staples was living in The Hill with his family, he started to become happy. "There was no traffic to speak of, and we played for hours in the streets. A child five years old passed easily from its mother's arms into the arms of the neighborhood." (Staples 362) Here, Staples is a child. He is acting like a child, and he identifies himself as a child. He feels happy in this neighborhood with people similar to himself. "I lost The Hill when my family was evicted." (Staples 362). He not only loses the place he felt safe; he loses his childhood and his innocence. The Hill represented a safe haven. Even though his house may not have been the most pleasant because of his father, the neighborhood made up for it. After he loses The Hill, he finds out that the outside world is not as perfect as The Hill was. "We landed miles away in the Polish West End...My family had crossed the color line." (Staples 362). Because he is exposed to people who treat him as inferior, Staples thinks of himself as a person who is not wanted by the vast majority of people. This once again, tarnishes his idea about himself. He stops thinking of himself as a happy child, he instead starts taking into account the discrimination around him. "Deprived of friends, I retreated into comic books. My favorite hero was the Silver Surfer, bald and naked to his silver skin riding a surfboard made of the same silver stuff." (Staples 362). This is very significant because the Silver Surfer represents a blank slate, someone empty of identity. He is described as having a silver coating all around his body. This silver coating is referring to having a shield against the outside world. He wishes he could be like the Silver Surfer. He wants to become someone who is not looked down upon; he wants to have a thick barrier between everyone and himself to protect his vulnerabilities.

Staples knew that he needed to escape even when he was young. He says “My fantasies of escape centered on airplanes; I was drunk with the idea of flying.” (Staples 362). It is very interesting that he wanted to run away at such a young age. He was already dreaming about leaving everything behind and starting fresh. He talks about his toy plane that was destroyed by a grandfather of a Ukrainian boy. “The pieces were the width of popsicle sticks and wrapped in the rubber band. This was the deepest cruelty I had known.” (Staples 363). The Ukrainian family, who was white, had crushed his dreams of escaping within seconds. They slaughtered his model plane, which represented his freedom from his overwhelming life. He realized that unless he somehow created a true barrier that helped him come above whites oppressing him, he would always be stuck here. At this point in his life he was a child facing the problem of how to cope with everyone on the outside hating you. He chose escape as the best method. He only dreamed about it though. His sister was the first one to actually escape.

Once his sister starts leaving, he realizes that he cannot let the family fall apart. Staples has sentiment in his heart and wants his family to be united and happy. He wanted to escape, but wants his family left behind happy. He knows that if his sister leaves, things would go downhill for his family. At this point in his life he is subjected to the role of the mother. His mother is falling weak, she does not have the strength to keep her family united anymore. Staples knows he has to help. “I followed her...I trotted after her, firing questions. ‘Where do you think you’re going? What is on your mind? What are you trying to do to yourself?’ I was my mother’s son and accepted all she told me about the danger of the night.” (Staples 363). The fact that he says “I was my mother’s son” really indicates that he wants to become an authoritative figure. He never has had power before. Previously, his escape method with planes gave him a sense of power, but now, he likes the fact that he can boss around and attempt to dictate his older sister. “I

had become the child parent. I could scold and insult – but I was too young and ill-formed to instruct. I relished the role; it licensed me to be judge and disparage people I envied but lack the courage to imitate.” He just starts his journey as being what he calls a “child parent” in great joy. He loves being in charge. What he does not realize is that being in charge is not always easy.

Once Yvonne gets away, Staples thoughts change. He sees the downside of having authority. He sees that just because he may have had the power of words, he was not able to stop bad things from happening. He was unable to fix his family. After Yvonne is gone, he becomes more and more immersed with playing his mother’s role. “My brothers and sisters were part of my skin; you only notice your skin when something goes wrong with it. My youngest brother, Blake, got infections that dulled his hearing...Bruce broke his arm....Sherri began to sleepwalk...my five year old sister Christi burned nearly to death. (Staples 363). There is tragedy after tragedy in Staples’ life. He is responsible for everyone, but this is obviously becoming overwhelming. “Every illness and injury and visit to the hospital involved me. I was first assistant mother now, auxiliary parent in every emergency.” (Staples 363). Just a while ago, Staples wanted to run away, but now he is trapped this role of a mother. He does not know to escape anymore. He loses his own identity completely. He now has become a mother. His subjectivity is now become the most confusing it has ever been. Him playing the part of a black female really affected his interpretation of himself. His subjectivity was lost in the mess of becoming a black mother.

In the essay “Effaced into Flesh: Black Women’s Subjectivity,” written by Jennifer DeVere Brody, there is a good explanation about why the subjectivity of a black female is so complicated. Brody describes how black women are read as “chaos” (Brody 1). “This understanding of flesh allows us to see how black women, without a ‘unified’ subjectivity,

continue to be cast as figures in the-process-of-becoming – as being(s) still searching for a...politicized social body.” (Brody 1). This section here implies how being a black woman is not easy because they face both gender discrimination and race discrimination. They have a tough time understanding their subjectivity because it is so complicated. “Black women desire what they ‘cannot not want’ (to quote Gayatri Spivak) – namely a ‘coherent’ subjectivity.” (Brody 1). Essentially, Brody is making the point that black women cannot find their own subjectivity because it is too vast and there are too many theories of what a black women’s subjectivity should be. Their subjectivity is so intricate that many times even authors struggle to present it in comprehensible manner. (Brody 1). Black female subjectivity is obscured for a couple reasons. Black females have a tough time finding their place in society. There are so many stereotypes about them that finding their true self and subjectivity becomes difficult. They do not know which “sect” of blackness they should fall under.

Staples, a black man, already had numerous identity issues that centered on racism and his childhood. To add up on his problems, now he faced the issue of being subjected into the role of a black, female mother. He did not know how to find his identity while he was being the “second mother” of the family. When he was with Christi in the hospital he would go around authoritatively seeing all the other children who were there. However he says “When real parents visited, I felt like a fraud.” (Staples 364). He acknowledges the fact that he is not a real parent, but instead a person who has been forced into the role of being a parent. His father was always cold and distant, so being a caring parent in his eyes means being a “mother.” “Christi’s accident made the world dangerous. When left in charge, I gathered the children in the living room and imprisoned them there.” (Staples 364). Staples no longer the arrogant and proud “mother” he once was to Yvonne. He is now paranoid and scared. He cannot handle the tragedies that his

siblings go through. Staples is not strong enough to endure another of his siblings get hurt again. A mother is known to be strong for her children. He is not. He cannot be.

Understanding the subjectivity of a black woman is too difficult for Staples. He is not able to accept fear of losing his siblings. He loves his brothers and sisters so much that he cannot bear the thought of them getting hurt. He is after all their brother, not their mother. He has a troubled time with realizing that running away is his best option. From the age of ten he was parenting his siblings. He ran away when he went to college. He spent approximately ten years living in fear that another one of his siblings would get hurt. He knew as long as he lives with his family he will not be able to protect himself from the outside world. In order to be “safe” he needed to become educated so he can have a sense of worth again. “Five years later I succeeded in running away- this time to college....I lived at school year round” (Staples 364). Once he ran away he finally had an identity. He could identify himself as an educated, black man. He was able to find his subjectivity. Brent Staples describes himself as “a 42-year-old Black man, the only person among my nine siblings to go to college. One of my brothers is a drug addict; one of my sisters did time in jail. The question I’m dealing with now is, how do I as an achiever and educated person love and nurture my family?” (Peterson 1). Even though Staples has achieved his shield and now understands his place in society, he still has some mother-like symptoms. He tried as hard as he could to get away from being subjected into the horrifically difficult role of being a mother. However, now that he has a separate identity that can serve as his barrier from being sucked in too much by the “chaos” of the black female subjectivity, he wants to go back and love and care for his family. In a sense, he is a freed man now. If he was selfish, he could have left and never looked back at his family. But, because he is quite the selfless person, he does still care about his siblings. “The sight of a child on its own excludes everything else from

view...I follow and watch and intervene because I have no choice. When next time you see a child beyond its mother's reach...I am there, watching you watch the child." (Staples 364). This last line is very impactful. He admits that the mother inside of him will always remain there. He has found a way of peace by leaving his family and forming a new educated identity of a black man. Still, he still has mother-like instincts in his heart that he will never be able to leave behind.

Brent Staples had a very turbulent life growing up. He suffered from not being able to find his identity. His father and his racist environment led Staples wishing he could escape. Before he could leave, he got trapped into the role of being the mother of his nine siblings. When he was subjected to the role of becoming a black, female mother, Staples' subjectivity was so out of reach that he realized he needed to run away so he could form a new identity. He used education to help himself become a more stable individual. No matter what he did, though, he always helps a child in need. Today, he identifies himself as an educated, black man with motherly instincts that will always look out for his own siblings and the children he sees around him.

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