

Black Means Run

by [Kailyn Williams](#)

I am black. It is an artless, unalterable truth. The color black is unyielding and overpowering. Black paint overwhelms all the colors on its canvas. Vandal, criminal, nefarious thug: black is the color of vice.

I am also a classical musician. It's a consistent spectacle for people seeing as, contrary to the charming notion that America is some 'post-racial' egalitarian utopia, we've been conditioned to see color as code: green means go, red means stop, black means run. So why would a vandal, criminal, nefarious thug be playing Beethoven? You see, code switching is merely color swatching, testing out, blending in. But black doesn't blend, it stains: assimilation is simply a band-aid over a gunshot wound, it does not expel the shrapnel. You cannot conceal what you are, only dilute the pigmentation. After all, when looking at a painting, we ignore the finer details of the piece in search of some 'bigger picture' to categorize the art we see among the art we know. I've learned to look at myself this way, to gaze at my objective story detached from my subjective truth, to understand myself through the eyes of the audience, not the artist. This, perhaps, is why I remain unsurprised when I receive strange stares at piano recitals or orchestra rehearsals: I'm an anomaly of the paintbrush. Yet in childhood, I hoped that I'd be spared from discrimination if I could only carry my violin case wherever I went. That was until someone asked me if it was a gun. Classical music is a glaring neon splotch on my canvas of life, a deviation from my predetermined story. It's loud and bright but not quite brilliant enough to overpower my blackness. As I've come to realize, though, nothing actually is.

I'm not the only one who has felt this way. In his 1986 essay "Just Walk On By," African American author Brent Staples reflects on his experiences as a young black man living and working in Chicago and New York. To the white residents of these cities, namely white women, Staples is a potential "mugger . . . rapist, or worse" (153). What these women don't know is that Staples is getting his doctorate from the University of Chicago and writes for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *New York Times*. Regardless, Staples writes that "[t]hese truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever suspect" (154). Staples' interior qualities have been muffled by the sheer volume of his six foot two black exterior, reducing his identity to a monolithic construction of what a black man ought to be and not necessarily who Staples, or any black man for that matter, is. This 'guilty until proven innocent' complex manifests in

the way Staples behaves in society and, more tragically, in the way he reckons with his identity. Staples has made every attempt to soften the impression of ‘mugger, rapist, or worse,’ but no matter how quiet he gets, how far away he walks, how polite he is, or even how much financial or academic success he gains, he is cursed with “the ability to alter public space in ugly ways” (153). Self-awareness, most often something to be celebrated, has become something of an affliction for Staples. It invades both his extrinsic and intrinsic selves, forcing him to see himself from the outside. Though Staples tries to distinguish between these two selves – who he is, and what he is perceived to be – have they already fused into one?

W.E.B. Du Bois would answer yes. Under the conditions of blackness in the United States, who and what African American people are is rarely distinguishable in their country’s eyes or even their own. Du Bois, a black intellectual who composed the majority of his work in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, proposed groundbreaking theories regarding African American heritage and culture that went on to shape the fields of psychology and sociology as we know them. His book *The Souls of Black Folk*, a compilation of essays analyzing the pervasive role of racism in a recently industrialized, post-emancipation United States, made a profound impact on the way we understand the relationship between African Americans, white Americans, and America itself. In the first essay of *The Souls of Black Folk*, titled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” Du Bois famously coins the concept of “double-consciousness,” a distinctly American experience in which black people, whether they’re aware of it or not, adopt a split perception of themselves: “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts . . . two warring ideals in one dark body” (3). Consequently, “this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” leads black people to question their place in their country and, inevitably, in their own bodies and minds (3). It is a deprivation of the self from – for lack of a better word – itself. Du Bois proclaims that through this denial of basic human autonomy, “the freedman has not yet found freedom in his promised land” (6), suggesting that in a post-slavery United States, the black man remains enslaved, both to the white man and to himself.

Du Bois pairs the concept of double-consciousness with another phenomenon: the “veil.” He argues that through segregation, black people have been “shut out from [the white person’s] world, implying that through ‘the veil,’ white people cannot see black people for who they truly are nor understand the pain that racism and injustice have brought upon them (3). The use of a veil in the place of a metaphorical cataract, blindfold, or hood, is a literary decision subtly divergent from usual depictions of ‘blindness’: a veil isn’t fixed and isn’t opaque. In other words, a veil isn’t, or at least shouldn’t have to be, absolute. Du Bois argues that double-consciousness and the veil aren’t inherent biological predispositions, but enforced social constructions. They are conditions of oppression that act as both a ‘sensation’ to be experienced and a ‘striving’ to be sought after. They obfuscate one’s self from oneself, preventing black people from discovering who they are beneath the identities that white people have constructed for

them. After all, it's through a split consciousness, an unforgiving awareness of the black self, that a black person may hope to assimilate into white America by purging themselves of their blackness.

Spending much of his time in predominantly white spaces, Brent Staples is no stranger to assimilation, and neither am I. It's easy, inevitable even, to censor your blackness and play up a white alter ego, to blunt the edges of your identity in order not to offend the people who surround you. For me, this looked like straightening my hair when going to my largely white school, pretending to like music I wouldn't otherwise have listened to, and shutting up when it came to discussions about race so as to not disturb my white peers who were 'sensitive' about the issue. Growing up in white spaces informed the way I dressed, how I spoke, the way I danced, what I ate, even how I laughed — assimilation is an uncompromising omnipresent disease: not lethal, but chronic, tainting everything it touches. For men like Staples, however, a failure to assimilate can have fatal consequences. In "Just Walk On By," Staples recounts a story about a black journalist who had been visiting a nearby town to investigate a murder case. "Mistaking the reporter for the killer," Staples details, "police officers hauled [the journalist] from his car at gunpoint and but for his press credentials would probably have tried to book him" (154). The journalist in Staples' story was protected by the fact that he was a journalist, his 'press credentials' his de facto bail. For both Staples and this man, their status as journalists can act as social capital, just like classical music may do for me: these accomplishments differentiate us from 'other' black people, not always enough to prevent discrimination, but perhaps just enough to check it once it happens.

This phenomenon is also a consistent obstacle for Dr. Don Shirley, the focus of the 2018 film *Green Book*, set in 1962. A virtuosic African American pianist and composer who frequented Carnegie Hall and whose genius was praised by the likes of Igor Stravinsky, Shirley was no stranger to the problem of assimilation. In the film, Shirley's sophistication is dramatized in part through his contrast with Frank 'Tony Lip' Vallelonga, a happy-go-lucky joker and Italian American who acts as Shirley's driver and navigator on a two-month concert tour through the Deep South during the Jim Crow era. The movie often pokes fun at the ironic contradiction between the two characters: in one scene, Vallelonga is scarfing down a greasy KFC chicken breast with his bare hands, no napkin, no plate, while Shirley, who has never eaten fried chicken before, complains about potentially getting grease on his clothes (00:51:19-00:53:04). But no matter how much Shirley defies the 'uncivilized black man' stereotype in his relationship with Tony Lip — in his personal deportment, in his musical virtuosity — he can't escape it. He is cheated out of higher recognition, denied the same privileges as his white musical contemporaries, and refused places to stay — hence his dependence on *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, published between 1936 and 1966, which highlighted safe lodging places for black people traveling throughout the Deep South. He is a prisoner of his own skin, and nothing he can say or play will change that.

Shirley held doctorates in liturgical arts, psychology, and music, and spoke Russian and Italian. W.E.B. Du Bois received a Ph.D. from Harvard and was similarly multidisciplinary and multilingual; Brent Staples earned his from the University of Chicago. All three used their higher education and cultural capital as weapons to contend with the veil. In his 1972 “The Veil Transcended,” Stanley Browdwinn describes how Du Bois uses imagery in his writing that creates “an esthetic commonality between himself and his white reader [A]t the same time, his display of well-earned erudition and easy familiarity with the cultural signs of the white world [help] to elevate the image of the black mind in many reader’s eyes” (14). In *Souls*, Du Bois himself writes, “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not Across the color line, I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil” (283). For Du Bois, once a black person becomes aware of the veil, they might very well aspire to transcend and “dwell above” through harnessing the power of education.

Today, however, Du Bois’ employment of white intellectual and classical figures in a work aimed at black America and written as a manifesto for higher education can feel limiting. Due to the persistence of systemic and societal forces working against them, many black people remain unable to escape the centuries-long struggle for class mobility. Even such status or class symbols as a knowledge of classical music, a violin case in one’s hand, a grand piano in the living room, or a casual reference to a Stravinsky ballet or Wagner opera might not be enough of a weapon against the veil. My violin may be more like Staples’ press credential. It’s no wonder Staples would whistle melodies from popular classical composers to relieve apprehensive white people: “Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn’t be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*” (155). An educated black person is an American oxymoron.

I recognize the privilege that comes with a knowledge of classical music and how, by mastering something supposedly reserved for the wealthy, for the elite, I have climbed a little farther up the American socio-economic ladder. While a black person might aim to assimilate into white America by purging themselves of their blackness, I say again that one’s assimilation is simply a band-aid over a gunshot wound; it does not expel the shrapnel. At one point in *Green Book*, Don Shirley asks, “If I’m not black enough, and if I’m not white enough, and if I’m not man enough, then tell me, Tony, what am I?” (01:33:04). Though Tony Vallelonga has no answer for him, I know the answer to Shirley’s question. Shirley may have aimed to transcend the veil through the power of education, but his accomplishments aren’t a solution to the problem. They are a means to an end. Pursuing predominantly white pastimes or careers does not change or elevate one’s blackness: it further complicates it. After all, through a proximity to whiteness – this may look like working or learning in higher education, or living in

white neighborhoods, or pursuing white-dominated interests – the strength of one’s blackness is further exacerbated.

Just because you know what burdens you, doesn’t mean you can alleviate that burden. But you can use your knowledge to emancipate yourself from the mental shackles of prejudice. I for one know I am black; it is an artless, unalterable truth. I know that to many, black is unyielding and overpowering, overwhelming other colors on its canvas. I know that in America, black is the color of vice, and black means run. I also know that I cannot change that. I can change how I see myself. I am not a stain. I am not an anomaly of the paintbrush. I am a classical musician. I am a student. I may not make sense to people, but that is my greatest protest.

Works Cited

Brodwin, Stanley. “The Veil Transcended.” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1972, pp. 303–322.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

Green Book. Directed by Peter Farrelly, performances by Mahershala Ali and Viggo Mortensen, Universal Pictures, 2018.

Staples, Brent. “Just Walk on by: A Black Man Ponders His Power to Alter Public Space.” *Public Space Reader*, Routledge, 2009, pp. 153–155.