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Standing Walking Dancing Tall

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Abstract

This is a poetic examination of how verticality becomes a threat in the context of race in the city.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the adjective “vertical” as “perpendicular to the plain of the horizon,” its synonym being “upright.” In short, the very activity of standing means that we are vertical; walking, we are verticals in motion; dancing, even more so. Being vertical is how we face the world, get from point A to point B, and interact with our environment. Through verticality, we are able to impress upon each other’s visual fields and form quick perceptions: tall, short, fast, slow. Verticality registers as privilege: tall people are not picked upon as often as short people are. But add race to verticality and verticality becomes a threat: being vertical when black signals danger. Especially at night.

Indeed, when two strangers meet in the city street at night, who are they to one another? A first impression to a first impression; a stereotype to a stereotype. The solution? Small, safe, individual gestures that help soften each stereotype a bit, perhaps even exchange a bad one for a good one, say, that of a thug for that of an educated black guy. At least, this is what Brent Staples, author of “Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders His Power to Alter Public Space,” does when he chooses to whistle classical tunes in response to those who “pick up” their “pace” (586) in his looming presence in the dark streets of Chicago and New York. Staples is a journalist prone to late night strolls but as a big black guy, “a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket,” he is, to those he encounters at night, a serious threat: “a mugger, a rapist, or worse” (586).

The fear he instills in others, involuntarily, stretches to the stores he visits, and even to his workplace: and in that lies his infuriating “ability to alter public space in ugly ways” (586) due to the color of his skin, as he moves about. Yet “poor and powerless young men” (588) often foolishly embrace this “power to intimidate” (587) and pay for a moment of “tough” (588) guy glory with their lives. Concludes Staples, “where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death” (586). So Staples chooses to “remain a shadow—timid, but a survivor,” by learning to suppress “the rage” (588) that boils inside him for being a criminal without a crime, for having an unwanted companion, the thug stereotype, precede him no matter what. He chooses to channel his frustration into his sarcastic tone and his alliterations: it is not “the white, well dressed” woman “in her early twenties” who is his “victim” (586) but himself who is the subject of a crime of a different and perhaps more dangerous kind—the psychological one—where you learn to protect yourself by appeasing your perpetrators before they even attack you. You whistle the classics...Vivaldi, Beethoven...

But here comes a different hum:

The low beating of the tom-toms
The slow beating of the tom-toms,
Low...slow
Slow...low—
Stirs your blood.

(Langston Hughes, "Danse Africaine")

And I see her, at 108 cm tall, in reddish-brown, eyes closed, fingers curled, her body erect, naked except for the tribal cover on her genitals, head tilted backwards, ears full of sound. She is Richmond Barthe's *African Dancer* statue, who hears the beating of the tom-toms from Langston Hughes poem "Danse Africaine," or perhaps a different but equally powerful sound...She is in her own sound world (Fig. 1).

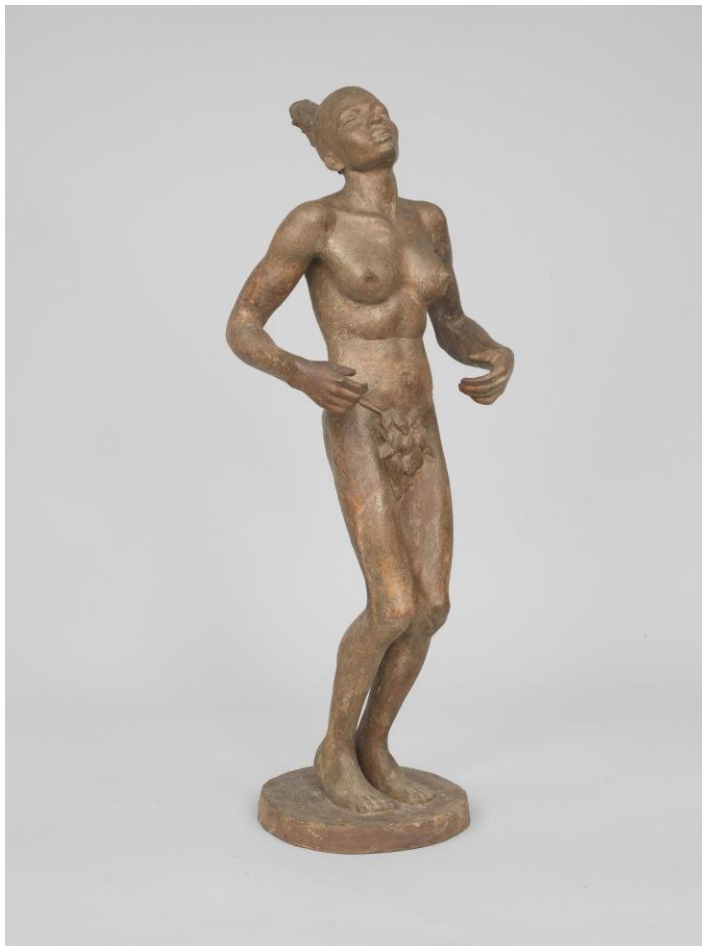


Fig. 1. R. Barthe (1901-1989). *African Dancer*, 1933. Plaster, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Source: <http://whitney.org/Events/99ObjectsAfricanDancer>.

This miniature woman, this oversized doll is a statuette of a particular kind. She resembles in color, size, and scanty garb the wooden statuettes of women one finds in the crowded markets of Dakar, Senegal. Sold as souvenirs for tourists, 2 for 25,000 CFA, but after some serious bargaining, 2 for 2,500 CFA, those statuettes of women are polished, poised, trophy-like, performing the stereotypical (at least, for the Westerner, who is often the buyer) female tasks: carrying a basket on top of her head or a baby tied to her back, or a hunting tool for her husband...Verticality as labor (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. African woman statuette. Wood. Market place, Dakar, Senegal, 2015.
Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

But the *African Dancer* in the Whitney Museum is not performing a generic female task, even if proudly; she is simply enjoying herself by completely giving in to the sounds she hears. We do not hear these sounds but we see them in her entranced body and in her curled fingers. Her verticality is one of joy!

An African woman in the trance of dancing somewhere in tribal Africa; an African-American man whistling the classic composers to ease pedestrians on the city streets of urban America at night: what do these two have in common? How can one teach me more about the other? The small dancer in the museum and the tall guy in the city streets? One, born from the imagination of the sculptor; the other, from the reality of daily living? One, subject to the gaze of viewers, who penetrate her naked body, study her exposed breasts, ponder her curled fingers, her closed eyes, her do, the color of the plaster she is made of, her genital patch, wonder why she is leaning backwards; the other—subject to the gaze of strangers with prejudice against dark skin, casting a regular guy as a criminal. The statue is in the museum, to be admired; the guy is out in the city streets, to be feared. Does someone fear the dancer? Does someone admire the guy?

Museum visitors, city pedestrians: the gaze is our weapon that can glorify or kill; that can give verticality too much or too little power. And yet...there is something that resists that gaze. Uninterested in and untouched by what has gone around her for the 80+ years since she has been created, this little lady in the museum is fierce! It is some power she has and no one can take that away from her: how she hears the sounds, what the sounds do to her, and how sound and woman become one. The guy, however, has power that he does not want, that he is willing to give up, right here, right now, that he will never miss. His power incapacitates him; her passion empowers her. She is naked and trapped in the museum, subject to our penetrating gaze, but free to be who she is, as the tom-toms beat. Staples, free to roam the city, any city, is forever trapped by the stereotype of his dark skin that accompanies him wherever he goes, whatever he does, regardless of his will. Verticality is his prison.

How can you get rid of a stereotype?

How can you get rid of a stereotype before it gets rid of you?

Yes, you are “the darker brother,” Brent Staples, Langston Hughes, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner... Yes, you do “sing America.” But who hears your song?

How long before standing tall means standing free?

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About the author

Blagovesta Momchedjikova, PhD, is a lover and writer of cities. She teaches writing, art, and the urban experience at New York University; and chairs the Urban Culture Area for the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association (MAPACA) and the Conference Scientific Committee for the International Panorama Council (IPC). She has edited *Captured by the City: Perspectives in Urban Culture Studies* (2013) and *Urban Feel* (2010); co-edited *From Above: The Practice of Verticality* (2019), *Thoughts and Visions On and Around the Queens Museum's Panorama of the City of New York* (2018), and *Public Place: Between Spectacle and Resistance* (2016); and contributed to *The International Panorama Council Journal*, *The Everyday of Memory*, *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, *Streetnotes*, *Iso Magazine*, *The Journal of American Culture*, *Tourist Studies*, *Genre: Imagined Cities*, and *PIERS*.

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