

# From Kenya to North America

## One Woman's Journey

**Njoki Kamau**

It was during my early years in high school in Kenya that I was first exposed to the idea that far away in the Americas lived people who were black. I was greatly fascinated by this idea. Until then, history was just another mundane class that focused on Europeans colonizing Africa and large parts of the rest of the world. The materials covered in class included David Livingstone's three missionary journeys. No effort was made to bring to the student's awareness the fact that the caravans of the so-called "slaves" that Livingstone stumbled on in the interior of Africa were Africans like ourselves. Obviously this was part of the colonizer's overall strategy to keep us disconnected from not only other Africans in the continent, but also black people in the diaspora.

In September 1976, after finishing college, I came to the United States as a Fulbright student to pursue graduate studies in management. When I arrived at Southern Methodist University, I was excited to note that my roommate was a black woman. I felt a great sense of relief, especially because I had noticed that the campus was predominantly white. When I woke up the following day, I further noticed that everyone in the apartment and building was black. I soon learned that this was where SMU housed its few black undergraduate students. SMU was not willing to place me in its graduate housing because this was reserved for their white students only.

When I complained to the housing office and threatened to call the Kenyan embassy, I was moved to the "theology complex," where there were a few international students. After a while, I decided to move off campus, only to find that an apartment that had been promised to me was given to somebody else by the time I arrived to sign a lease. When I told an Asian graduate student from Kenya, he told me that these things happened often to people of color and were classic examples of racial discrimination in the United States.

I was too new to this society to fully understand and detect racism in all situations. I began to notice in class, however, that some professors would never call on me even when I had my hand raised. It was a rude awakening, that the color of my skin had become a most significant factor in defining who I was and, to some extent, in determining my ability to fulfill my potential as a human being. Needless to say, I felt both anger and fear simultaneously. From then on, I began to live with the unsettling feeling that I lived in a society where, because of my skin color, I would be required to prove myself at every turn—in the classroom, in the workplace, indeed everywhere.

[During the time I lived in the all-black housing], black Americans in the complex, while somewhat intrigued to have me there, were not ready to embrace me yet. In a few instances, my roommate and other students in

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the complex would hold parties right on the doorstep of our building, and I would not be invited. In the Kikuyu culture that I come from this would have been considered unthinkable. In fact, when I tried to make friends with some of the black students on campus, I was not very successful. It slowly began to dawn on me that even though we shared the same skin color, our cultures were vastly different, and we had little information about each other's way of life. I came to the conclusion that I was not invited to the party because I was different; I was African and not black American.

Unfortunately for myself and my two fellow African students, our feelings of rejection and exclusion left us vulnerable to an internalization of the dominant culture's stereotypes of black Americans. We began to believe some of the things that we heard from whites who did strike up friendships with us. But as I grappled with the idea of giving up any hope of ever developing a meaningful connection with black Americans, it hit me that African Americans were probably also vulnerable to stereotypes about us. They had grown up on racist tales of the dark continent, and thought themselves better than Africans or at least too different from Africans to know them. I therefore decided to keep an open mind and to embark on a long journey of educating myself about black Americans as my way to bridge the impasse. I hoped that this process could open a gateway through which one day I would build strong connections with this people, whose capacity to survive continues to fill me with awe.

As if my life as a graduate student was not already complicated enough and my needs and desires to find my feet difficult enough, I could hardly believe that I had become a victim of domestic violence while at Northwestern University [where I went for a PhD in 1978]. The perpetrator was a Kenyan man whom I viewed as my "brother," Kikuyu like myself. When the police came, time and time again, they tried to encourage me to file a complaint. I could not find it in my heart to throw not only a foreign African but now a "black" brother into the throes of a colonial-like white criminal justice system. What if I was accused by the few Africans and African Americans on campus of betraying our already oppressed race? Was I not supposed to put my being African/black (race) before my being a woman (gender)? What if both communities ostracized me?

This experience became the turning point in my life. It completely shattered my former beliefs: one, that higher education could cushion me from being victimized by racism, and two, that self-identifying as an African or black could protect me from gender-based violence. I set out on a second mission to become a women's rights advocate. The question that continues to perplex me is, "When a black woman is victimized by violence, in a racist society, where should she go for help without seeming to betray the race?"

Thus my effort to become informed about African Americans has been joined with my discovery of what it means to be a woman. By connecting with a black community I have discovered a resilience, creativity, and brilliance, and a spirit that will not give up, no matter how overwhelming the odds. This has left me with a sense of deep respect and admiration for all African Americans as a people, but especially black women.

What I have learned is that there is overwhelming evidence that if one is born nonwhite in this society, and especially if one is born black, one receives the message from birth that one is somehow inferior. The misinformation campaign by the larger society is directed at all black people who live in the United States throughout their entire lives and is part of the overall strategy to keep racism in place both in the diaspora and in Africa. It is especially disturbing to note that our direct interactions with each other occur through the prism of this erroneous information. Our deep internalization of this misinformation about ourselves renders our efforts to come together very difficult. The good news is that we have begun to understand what has happened to us, and to make concrete efforts to dismantle our internalized oppression.

I have also sought to learn from all women, rich and poor, white, black, Latino, Asian, and Native American who simply want to be treated humanely. Working with women, and on women's issues, has shown me the uneasy ways in which gender, class, and race intersect and the contradictions they produce in all communities. For instance, while most black men can deeply understand racism, only a few are able to confront their own sexism. Similarly, while most white feminists experience great outrage at sexual harassment in the workplace, few show real empathy toward victims of racism.

Over the last decade, therefore, I have devoted my time to advocating for women and blacks and learning about race, class, and gender. In fact, my journey to learn brought me into an active involvement in the community on racial, gender, and cultural issues and to teaching a course on race and gender at Northwestern University. Through this involvement, I have developed deep and meaningful relationships with black Americans, which has shown me that skin color is one thing but situating oneself within the socio-political context and culture of a people is most important. I also once served as the director of the very domestic violence center that I had called for help.

When I left my home village in Kenya 19 years ago to pursue a higher education, there was nothing in my background as a young woman that could have adequately prepared me for what awaited me on this side of the Atlantic. I am fully aware that without the support of my community of black and women friends that I would never have successfully overcome the obstacles that lay in my path. I have learned the importance of belonging to a community. For us Africans who are far from home, I cannot over-emphasize how important it is to belong to and identify with a community of your choice. The community that I have chosen is the descendants of those Africans who were brought here 400 years ago. Even with its paradoxes, it has seemed to me the most right and intelligent thing to do.