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Response to “Walking while Black”

The essay “Walking While Black” by Garnette Cadogan illustrates the reality that they had to live through as a black immigrant into America. Cadogan grew up in a different country entirely, with a very different culture. This allowed Cadogan to note nuances from a different perspective when he began his studies in America. This perspective provides a view into the discriminatory world that he found himself in after he immigrated to the United States.

As a background, Cadogan described his hometown in Jamaica as this very dangerous, political war ground. If you were caught wearing the wrong colors or if a political henchman thought you were from the wrong neighborhood it was not unlikely that you would be killed. In the 1980’s Cadogan’s hometown of Kingston, Jamaica was a landscape that most would stay as far away from as possible. Despite this, Cadogan writes, almost fondly, about him walking the streets at night, navigating all the things that could get you in trouble. He made friends from all walks of life on those streets, he stopped seeing them as frightening and learned to enjoy what he has been given. The dangerous streets were a way to escape abuse in his home life and provided him with great comfort.

In 1996 Cadogan left Jamaica to pursue college in New Orleans. He was hopeful, looking forward to discovering what the city and the streets were like. Quickly, he found out the cruel reality of America. In a world where he was always navigating threats and trying to not have people attack him, he was unprepared that people here see him as the threat instead. Not even one month into his stay in America, Cadogan offered to help a man in a wheelchair who was stuck in the middle of the road. That man, instead of being grateful, threatened to shoot Cadogan and instead asked a white pedestrian to help him, a jarring difference from what would be expected.

Many points in this text make me think about how a black man must navigate America. Cadogan described having to avoid wearing things like a white shirt and jeans because some people would see him as a “black troublemaker”. What struck me here is how his self-expression was suppressed because he needed to please the people in power so he would not get labeled as something he was not. I have never needed to think about how I need to go about my day just so I don’t find myself in trouble that I don’t deserve. This is a side that I never knew people needed to think about before going about their day.

In comparing that to America, Cadogan reveals that he feels more on edge and forced to fit in. He felt inhuman. Getting ready in the morning, in the back of his mind, there were police. While walking on the street, there were police stopping and bullying him. Even when he is simply running down the street to make an appointment, cops pull him off the sidewalk and cuff him. Not even once have the cops apologized. As people who should be authority figures, they seemed more like a group of thugs, out to get you. Thinking about how I would feel if I were in his position, I can only imagine how terrible it must feel, I have seen stories of how police are extra cautious of black people, but I never imagined it to this degree, if you place most other races in this same position I cannot see the cops doing nearly the same. What truly got me was that they refused to admit fault.

In response to treatment like this Cadogan had come up with a formula. Because He did not grow up in America, He never had “The Talk” where his parents would have explained to him how to deal with cops peacefully to not get himself in un-needed trouble. He had to come up with these on his own as a teenager in a foreign country. Every time, he had to put on an act to please the cops. He would pull out his student ID first “by accident”, he would put on a thicker accent, mention that he was a college student, and dress extra “Ivy League style”. Meanwhile, in my experience with the police, they are much more forgiving and friendly, I can’t help but have in the back of my mind now, thinking, would they have treated me the same if I had a different skin color? Just recently, I found myself pulled over because I accidentally forgot to turn on my headlights, and I had left my wallet in my dorm. Instead of getting me in trouble, the cop accepted the picture I had of the ID, and let me off with a warning. Would I have gotten the 100$ fine if I was not of a whiter complexion?

Not just the cops, however, what stood out to me is how everyone, it seemed, treated him differently. A woman crosses the street to avoid him, and a man in a wheelchair refuses assistance and even threatens his life. Everyone there treated him with prejudice. All these eyes on him made him feel more like he was tiptoeing around instead of meandering aimlessly as he had back at home. It was almost like everyone was out to get him, and there were always eyes on him. He felt less safe on the streets of New Orleans than on the statistically much more dangerous streets back home.

After reading the experience that Cadogan had documented in his essay “Walking while Black” I have found myself understanding more, about the troubles that black people face every day, the stress, the anxiety, and the inability to ever relax in a public setting, as he wrote, “Walking alone has been anything but monotonous for me; monotony is a luxury.”