“ONE STEP FROM SUICIDE”: THE HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE OF BEING BLACK IN AMERICA

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This article theorizes a holistic view of the lived experience of those facing white racism, as well as of their representations and interpretations of that racism. By racism, we mean systemic racism: discriminatory patterns and practices which involve more than the actions of a few individual attitudes, but rather the systemic practices of racism built into society’s major institutions (Feagin 2006).

The data presented here come from one black woman’s detailed experiences with everyday racism. Kathryn, a forty-something successful entrepreneur in a large U.S. city, gives a narrative account of her experiences as a black woman in America—providing us with her representation, and consequent understanding, of racism. In Kathryn’s interview we see the personal and family losses that have resulted from decades of dealing with whites who conceptualize and practice racism. Consider Kathryn’s reply to a question about what it is like living in a white world:

What is it like to be a black person in white America today? One step from suicide… what I’m saying is that the psychological warfare games that we have to play everyday just to survive. We have to be one way in our communities and one way in the workplace or in the business sector. We can never be ourselves all around. I think that may be a given for all people, but us particularly, it’s really a mental health problem. It’s a wonder we haven’t all gone out and killed somebody or killed ourselves. [By the] time we learn the rules of the game, we learn, you know: They say get an education, go out and be entrepreneurs, pull yourself up from your boot straps – what boot straps? Hell, we’ve got to first get the boot in order to have the straps. We try to do all these things, we learn the rules of the games, and by the time we have mastered them…then they change the rules of the game. The game becomes something else, because now you have learned how to play it. So, it changes constantly, constantly. It always keeps us on edge.

Kathryn presses us to understand the pain and tension created by having to conform to the norms of white society while at the same time trying to maintain her integrity and identity as a human being. Let us be clear: Our aim is not to generalize Kathryn’s experiences to all black
women, although her experiences are very similar to those reported by other black women in other research studies and personal accounts (see Benjamin 1997; Scott 1991; St. Jean and Feagin 1998).

A first step in moving toward a holistic framework for understanding the impact of white racism focuses on specific events as reported and constructed by Kathryn to a black female interviewer. Her accounts of everyday racism accent the spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions of the events that take place. She usually does not have control over where, when, and with whom the events occur, and thus she must be constantly prepared to deal with them crashing into her everyday life—a time-consuming preparation not required of white women or men.

Spatial Dimensions of Everyday Racism

Racial oppression often has a distinctive spatial dimension, and its character can vary as a black person travels from a private site, such as home, to more public spaces, such as restaurants, hotels, or parking lots. Racial-cultural biases define, often in subtle ways, certain specific areas as “white” locations. In Kathryn’s interview we observe tactics which convey, often covertly, that her presence as a black woman is not welcome in these public spaces by whites. Kathryn describes four typologies of space, best conceptualized along a continuum (very public, less public, near private, and private), that offer varying levels of vulnerability and protection from discrimination by whites.

The “Foreign Country”: Vulnerability in Public Spaces

Kathryn describes how, with the help of her friends and the community, she prepares herself to deal with what she calls “the foreign country”:

Well, I try to be as humanistic as possible, but there are times, trying times. I try to keep myself, you know you can’t remove yourself from society, but I try to, before I go into, I call it ‘the foreign country,’ I try to figure out what it’s all about, so I’ll know how to deal with it just to save myself some energy, stress, and help my mental state. I’ll call somebody and say, who is so-and-so, well, how are they, or whatever, and that will kind of help me kind of prepare myself, so that if they do say something, then I can be prepared to deal with it.

This spatial metaphor of “the foreign country” is striking and calls attention to the distinctive whiteness of many places blacks must