

Viewpoint: What it's like to be an African in the US

As protests rock the US following the death of African-American George Floyd in police custody, Kenyan journalist Larry Madowo writes about the racism he has experienced in the country.



A woman with her face covered by a Kenyan flag protests against George Floyd's death

In my first week in New York City last summer, I was invited to dinner at a friend's penthouse on the wealthy Upper West Side. I picked up some fruit for her and arrived at her building carrying a plastic bag. The front desk sent me through an open courtyard to the back of the building, past residents' garbage bags and into a surprisingly dirty lift.

When I got off upstairs, my host opened the door mortified, all the colour drained from her face. "My racist doorman thought you're a delivery guy and made you use the service elevator," she explained as she apologised. I have worked in the complicated racial hierarchies of South Africa and the UK and have travelled around the world, but it still stung that an American butler did not think accomplished white people like my friend and her husband could have a black dinner guest.

That early micro-aggression forewarned me that America may be the land of opportunity for many, but it would still reduce me to the colour of my skin and find me unworthy. In Kenya, I may disappear into the crowd, but in America I always have a target on my back for being black.

A day after investment banker Amy Cooper called the police after a Harvard-educated black man asked her to follow park rules and leash her dog, a white policeman knelt on George Floyd's neck for so long it eventually killed him.

I was heartbroken.

As protests broke out nationwide to demand justice for Floyd and the countless other black people who have been killed by police, I held my breath. How could I grieve for someone I did not know? How could I own a pain I had not lived, as an African "fresh off the boat" in America? I wondered if I would be appropriating the African-American struggle at a convenient moment.

Then I saw a video shot at a protest in Long Beach, California, that was clear about allegiances. "The best way that Africans in America can support African-Americans is to stand with us, and to understand that we're all the same," said a protester.

I asked Tom Gitaa - a publisher of Mshale newspaper, which serves African immigrants in the Midwest of the US - what he made of the protests, subsequent riots and looting that began in his city of Minneapolis. "Many of us didn't grow up with some of these civil rights issues in Africa so sometimes our understanding is not there.

"But with issues like police brutality and discrimination at the workplace, we're running into a lot of the same things African-Americans have experienced over the years," said Mr Gitaa, who moved to the US from East Africa about 30 years ago and whose American-born 24-year-old daughter has been one of the people making their voices heard on the streets. (...)

Because of the violent history of American policing for black and brown communities, parents are always on edge.

Ifrah Udgoon, a Somalia-born high school science teacher in Columbus, Ohio, lives with that fear for her 13-year-old son.

"Each passing day brings the realisation that soon, if not already, he will go from being seen as cute to being seen as threatening. And my heart breaks for his innocence," she wrote in South Africa's Mail & Guardian.