

# Teaching about Racial Segregation in Postwar America using *Black Like Me*

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**I**N November 1959, John Howard Griffin, a white novelist from Texas, struck up a conversation with a black shoeshine man near the French Quarter in New Orleans, Louisiana. The two men were acutely aware of the chasm that separated races in the Jim Crow South, but their relationship would soon change. Griffin, who wanted to obtain a deeper understanding of life for African Americans in the South, had begun a series of treatments to superficially change his racial identity. After visiting a skeptical dermatologist, Griffin shaved his head and used oral medicine, stain, and hours of exposure to ultraviolet rays to darken his complexion. A few days later Griffin, who had a wife and two children in Texas, returned to the shoeshine stand and began a poignant and dangerous journey through the Deep South, ostensibly as a black man.

The result of Griffin's six-week odyssey was *Black Like Me*, a provocative memoir published 50 years ago about the stark realities of racial injustice in postwar America. While largely ignored by Southern newspapers at the time, the book earned positive reviews, sold over ten million copies, and eventually became a film. In 1963, members of the U.S. Congress referenced the book in commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in the *Congressional Record*;<sup>1</sup> and the following year, Griffin recalled his experiences in the South before an audience of 4,500 people in Chicago. However, the success of the book also fueled hostility, and those angered by Griffin's message hung an effigy of him in his hometown of Mansfield, Texas. In 1960, Griffin, his wife and children, and his parents escaped to Mexico, where they stayed for nine months.

Griffin had initially envisioned the journey as a "scientific research study," but was so moved by the experience he simply published his journal instead. He walked, hitchhiked, and rode buses from New Orleans to Atlanta as a black man; and, in a few places such as Montgomery, Alabama, he toured neighborhoods and visited local businesses alternately as a black man and as a white man. Griffin struggled to find public restrooms and water fountains and faced racist intimidation at the hands of local white teenagers and the police. Elsewhere, Griffin experienced the daily indignities of being black in the South such as being called "boy" despite being in his late thirties or, on numerous occasions, the "hate stare" of whites. Griffin, who had attended college in France in the late 1930s and had worked for the French Underground during the Nazi occupation, compared life in the South to the "nagging, focusless

terror" in Europe in the early days of the Holocaust. His only consolation was the rewarding experience of interacting with Southern blacks. While renting a room he described as a "desolate, windowless cubicle" in a hotel in New Orleans that catered to blacks, he expressed amazement that his "first prolonged contact" with blacks involved kindness and respect rather than "drama." In Alabama, Griffin stayed with the family of a poor sawmill worker and reflected on both the generosity of his hosts and the common experiences of parents and children in both white and black families.

The South that Griffin stepped into as a black man was in turmoil by the late 1950s. Much of the region held fast to a rigid system of racial segregation and injustice with roots in the decades after Reconstruction. More than 50 years after W.E.B. Du Bois declared that the "problem of the color line"—or race relations—would dominate the twentieth century in the United States, the schools, public facilities, transportation, restaurants, and even cemeteries in the South remained racially segregated.<sup>2</sup> Disenfranchisement and limited economic opportunities, if not entrenched poverty, characterized a persistent racial hierarchy supported by the threat of racial intimidation and violence that limited racial change in the South.

Southern blacks and their white allies had struggled for racial equality since

## Excerpts from *Black Like Me* (1961)

### On a bus in New Orleans, Louisiana on November 8, 1959-

A middle-aged woman with stringy gray hair stood near my seat. She wore a clean but faded print house dress that was hoisted to one side as she clung to an overhead pendant support. Her face looked tired and I felt uncomfortable. As she staggered with the bus's movement my lack of gallantry tormented me. I half rose from my seat to give it to her, but Negroes behind me frowned disapproval. I realized that I was going "against the race" and the subtle tug-of-war became instantly clear. If the whites would not sit with us, let them stand. When they became tired enough or uncomfortable enough, they would eventually take seats beside us and soon see that it was not so poisonous after all. But to give them your seat was to let them win. I slumped back under the intensity of their stares.

But my movement had attracted the white woman's attention. For an instant our eyes met. I felt sympathy for her, and thought that I detected sympathy in her glance. The exchange blurred the barriers of race (so new to me) long enough for me to smile and vaguely indicate the empty seat beside me, letting her know she was welcome to accept it.

Her blue eyes, so pale before, sharpened and she spat out, "What're you looking at me like that for?" I felt myself flush. Other white passengers craned to look at me. The silent onrush of hostility frightened me. "I'm sorry," I said, staring at my knees. "I'm not from here." The pattern of her skirt turned abruptly as she faced the front. "They're getting sassier every day," she said loudly. Another woman agreed and the two fell into conversation.

My flesh prickled with shame, for I knew the Negroes rightly resented me for attracting such unfavorable attention. I sat the way that I had seen them do, sphinx-like, pretending unawareness.

### Mobile, Alabama November 21, 1959-

The foreman of one plant in Mobile, a large brute, allowed me to tell him what I could do. Then he looked me in the face and spoke to me in these words:

"No you couldn't get anything like that here." His voice was not unkind. It was the dead voice one often hears. Determined to see if I could break in somehow, I said, "But if I could do you a better job, and you paid me less than a white man..."

"I'll tell you... we don't want you people. Don't you understand that?"

"I know," I said with real sadness. "You can't blame a guy for trying at least."

"No use trying down here," he said. "We're gradually getting you people weeded out from the better jobs at this plant. We're taking it slow, but we're doing it. Pretty soon we'll have it so the only the jobs you can get here are the ones no white man would have."

"How can we live?" I asked hopelessly careful not to give the impression I was arguing.

"That's the whole point," he said, looking me square in the eyes, but with some faint sympathy, as though he regretted the need to say what followed: "We're going to do our damndest to drive every one of you out of the state."

### December 1, 1959 in Montgomery, Alabama-

I developed a technique of zigzagging back and forth. In my bag I kept a damp sponge, dyes, cleansing cream and Kleenex. It was hazardous, but it was the only way to traverse any area both as a Negro and a white. As I traveled, I would find an isolated spot, perhaps an alley at night or the brush besides the highway, and quickly apply the dye to face, hands and legs, then rub off and reapply until it was firmly anchored in my pores. I would go through the area as a Negro and then, usually at night, remove the dyes with cleansing cream and tissues and pass through the same area as a white man.

I was the same man, whether white or black. Yet when I was white, I received the brotherly-love smiles and the privileges of whites and the hate stares or obsequiousness from the Negroes. And when I was a Negro, the whites judged me fit for the junk heap, while the Negroes treated me with great warmth.

### Note about the Documents

John Howard Griffin (1920-1980), *Black Like Me*, Definitive Griffin Estate Edition (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2004) 21-22, 126-7. Wings Press will be releasing a 50th anniversary hard-back edition of *Black Like Me* in January. An eBook version will be available this fall.

# TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**Grade Level:** High School

(U.S. History, American Government, and Sociology)

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies:

❶ CULTURE; ❷ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE; ❸ PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENT; ❹ INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY; ❺ INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS; ❻ POWER, GOVERNMENT, AND AUTHORITY; ❽ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.

## 1. Focus Activity

Understanding the significance of *Black Like Me* requires a sense of the larger historical context. Capitalizing on prior knowledge from earlier units in American history, the class should generate three lists that help understand race in the South in 1959. The first list should include the ways in which race relations had not changed or changed very little in the South since the Civil War. The second list should include the ways in which Southern race relations appeared to have changed during the period. Finally, the third list should include national and even global changes in race relations that by 1959 began to assert pressure on the South's resistance to racial change.

## 2. Document Analysis

After briefly introducing the book, provide students with a copy of the excerpts from *Black Like Me*. Lead a class discussion with the following questions:

- What is the main idea that the author is trying to convey in these accounts?
- Who is the author's intended audience?
- What aspect of life in the South in 1959 was most shocking to Griffin? What would be most surprising to students today?

Encourage students to compare the excerpts to more familiar texts of the period such as Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963) and "I Have a Dream" speech (1963).

## 3. Oral History Project

Create an oral history project in which students interview older relatives and friends about American race relations in the decades after World War II. Ask students to generate questions related to the issues raised in *Black Like Me* and then record an interview in which older Americans have the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences.

## 4. Writing Activity

After reading the excerpts from *Black Like Me*, divide students into three groups. Ask each group to compose a short book review or editorial on *Black Like Me* from 1961 that reflects the perspectives of different newspapers in the United States.

- Group 1: a mainstream Northern newspaper such as *The New York Times* in 1961.
- Group 2: a newspaper in the South such as the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* in 1961.
- Group 3: a newspaper that served black communities in the North such as the *Chicago Defender* in 1961.

## 5. Research

Assign students to research the history of public attitudes about race via published opinion polls and popular magazines in the twentieth century. Direct students toward published collections of *Gallup Poll* results and ask them to analyze how both the questions and answers about race relations changed throughout the postwar period. Using searchable online databases to explore mainstream magazines such as *Time* and *Life*, students can trace the evolution of American race relations in the popular media. The archives for *Time* can be found at [www.time.com/time/archive](http://www.time.com/time/archive) and full issues of *Life* since 1936 are available at <http://books.google.com/>.

## 6. Racial Segregation, History, and Contemporary American Society

Exploring the persistence and evolution of segregation within American society is a valuable way to conclude lessons associated with *Black Like Me* and assess the legacy of historical issues. Students should examine the recent statistical data on segregation at [www.census.gov/hhes/segreg/seg.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/segreg/seg.html). The website includes two possibilities for measuring segregation in the United States and provides students with an opportunity to evaluate specific cities and states (including those mentioned in the book), examine state rankings, and compare racial segregation in terms of different groups.



An African American man enters the “colored” entrance of a movie house in Belzoni, Mississippi Delta, Mississippi.

(Marion Post Wolcott/Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-12888)

the nineteenth century. These efforts and their repercussions had altered the racial landscape that Griffin encountered in 1959. The larger historical context of *Black Like Me* included the migration of Southern blacks to the urban North; legal challenges to racial segregation such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954); the emergence of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and direct action protests; and the increased tension between federal policy and regional tradition as exemplified by the crisis of Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. The response of Southern whites, while hardly uniform, included “massive resistance,” the creation of White Citizen Councils, and the reemergence of Klan violence. Public opinion polls during the period indicated that fewer than 25 percent of Southern whites approved of such developments as the desegregation of schools and public transportation. In 1961, just as the book was published, a mere 13 percent of Southern whites polled believed that “integration should be brought about in the near future.”<sup>3</sup>

Amid this dramatic struggle for racial justice, so often dominated by familiar

heroes and villains, came a small yet compelling book about one man’s attempt to transcend the color line. *Black Like Me* offered little on specific issues such as public policy or the social activism associated with the civil rights movement. Instead, Griffin claimed his account “traces the changes that occur to heart and body and intelligence when a so-called first class citizen is cast upon the junkheap of second-class citizenship.”<sup>4</sup> Echoing African American author Ralph Ellison’s powerful novel *Invisible Man* (1952), *Black Like Me* included numerous references to Griffin’s sense that he, while passing as black, remained “invisible” within white society.

Committed to promoting racial change, Griffin knew that much of the racial injustice in the South endured because the rest of the nation was largely unaware of the realities of Southern life and had embraced older racist caricatures of Southern blacks. The significance of *Black Like Me* lay in the book’s ability to allow readers to experience vicariously the intimate details of the Jim Crow South. In this sense, *Black Like Me* mirrored the tradition of slave narratives such as *Narrative of the Life of*

*Frederick Douglass* or Harriet Beecher Stowe’s flawed yet influential novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Published in 1961, Griffin’s book was the literary equivalent of television, the new medium that allowed whites and blacks outside the South to experience the struggles and successes of the civil rights movement in locations such as Birmingham, Selma, or rural Mississippi. While even sympathetic whites often described the challenges of race relations as the “Negro problem,” Griffin’s powerful experiment provided readers with a personal window through which to better understand the nature of white privilege and racism in America. 🌐

#### Notes

1. Congressional Record, 88th Cong. 1st sess. 1963, U.S. House of Representatives, May 31, 1963, 9910-13.
2. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997, originally published in 1903) 34.
3. George H. Gallup, *Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972) 1572.
4. John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*, Definitive Griffin Estate Edition (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2004), ix.

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