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# *Intranational and interracial travel in "Black Like Me" by John Howard Griffin*

*Paulina Pietras*
Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce

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**Abstract**

"The world's landscapes are but the screen on which the past, present, and anticipated cosmic vanity of mankind is written. Land is the palimpsest of human needs, desires, meaning, greed, and fears". James Houston's vision of landscapes as reservoirs of the most fundamental aspects of humanity supports the cognitive value of traveling as far as interhuman relationships are concerned. This, in its interracial dimension, was a primary interest of John Howard Griffin. In 1959 the renowned white Texan journalist went on a tour of the Deep South, a quest preceded by a specific medical treatment resulting in Griffin's skin turning black. The journey was documented in the bestselling memoir *Black Like Me*, which is a testimony of Griffin's passing as a black man, the resulting alienation, dealing with "the hate stare" and, finally, him re-examining his own racism. The aim of my article is to demonstrate that, although some critics claim his passing was a failure (e.g., Kate Baldwin's assertion that Griffin's blackness is only superficial as the author sustains his "white" jargon both in thought and talk), the discussed memoir approaches the racial Other by sharing some vital features with the slave narrative (its purpose being the enhancement of communal consciousness or asking a white person to preface and thus authenticate the story).

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# Intranational and interracial travel in *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin

James Houston's assertion "The world's landscapes are but the screen on which the past, present, and anticipated cosmic vanity of mankind is written. Land is the palimpsest of human needs, desires, meaning, greed, and fears" (qtd. in Hamera and Bendixen 4) clearly points to the fact that landscapes may be treated as reservoirs of the most fundamental aspects of humanity. The vision supports the cognitive value of traveling as far as interhuman relationships are concerned. This had become the interest of John Howard Griffin, whose project's main concern was the examination of the interracial dimension of interhuman encounter. His 1959 tour of the Deep South, a quest preceded by a specific medical treatment (resulting in Griffin's skin turning black) is presented in *Black Like Me*, the bestselling memoir documenting the journey, still considered to be an American classic. Although regarded as controversial at the time of its release, the book won the *Saturday Review*'s Anisfield-Wolf award in 1962 for its contribution toward race relations. The aim of the journey was to experience "what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down" (Griffin 6). Griffin wanted to test the claim that, although the southern part of the United States was segregated, it was essentially peaceful and just; the two races were separate, but equal. The themes the memoir explores are the experiences of passing as a black man, internal and external alienation, dealing with the "hate stare" and overwhelming humiliation, the danger and fear entangled in the project, and, finally, the moment of revelation leading Griffin to re-examine his own racism. The purpose of this paper is to present the journey described in *Black Like Me* as well as to prove that, despite the claimed failure of Griffin's passing (cf. Kate Baldwin's assertion), the journalist succeeds in approaching the racial Other.

Griffin's memoir joins a long tradition of traveling south as well as of writing an autobiographical account of that journey. America (as both a country and a concept) was founded on movement (of people, ideas, goods), the core of the state's foundation being international immigration, nevertheless accompanied by intense travel within the continent. The latter is considered to be of equal importance in the creation and maintenance of the American nation: "If God were suddenly to call the world to judgement, He would surprise two-thirds of the population of the United States on the road like ants"

(qtd. in Cox 1). Hamera and Bendixen write in the Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*:

> Travel and the construction of American identity are intimately linked. It simultaneously exposes inter- and intra-cultural contradictions and contains them. It creates American "selves" and American landscapes through affirmation, exclusion, and negation of others, and interpolates readers into these selves and landscapes through specific rhetorical and genre conventions. (Hamera and Bendixen 1)

Thus, the constitutive aspect of American travel writing is emphasized as "a tool of self- and national fashioning that constructs its object even as it describes it" (Hamera and Bendixen 1). Intranational travel writers, from the very founding of the American republic, saw the disparity between northern and southern regions (the latter being presented as backward, wild, uncivilized and dangerous). The "Age of Nationalism" (between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War) made questions regarding the lack of unity in the "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson's concept for the nation) especially poignant (Cox 2). Thus, Griffin's juxtaposition seems to be based upon the stable foundation of tradition. The choice of the autobiographical mode is not accidental, either – travel writing approaches the autobiographical genre as fact and fiction intermingle in individual works of travel accounts.

Since the 19th century, travel testimonies have played a vital role in the formation of American national identity. Travel itself has symbolized the "ability of Americans to raise themselves in status, to leave the restraints of European society and to move where and when they desired" (Cox 5). The accounts provided Americans with information about the natural environment of the New World while at the same time teaching them about the cultures of other regions. However, intranational travel accounts also frequently contributed to the portrayal of separation and polarization between the two primary cultural regions. As Carolyn Porter remarks, the voice that dominated the discourse was "the voice of the white, Protestant male, and whatever its origins, it spoke with a Northern accent" (qtd. in Cox 8). Griffin consciously abandons such a status. The quest of adopting the identity of a discriminated other is preceded by his conversion into Catholicism.

The project Griffin became involved in was a complex, meticulously devised operation. In 1959 this renowned journalist started the therapy consisting of medication that darkened his skin, exposition to ultraviolet rays, cutting off his hair to hide an absence of curls, and shaving the back of his hands to hide his fair hairs. The medication the doctor prescribed was Oxsoralen, used normally to treat vitiligo. The whole treatment resulted in his passing as black in the American South for six weeks, traveling from Louisiana to

Georgia. The plan was to embody the ultimate otherness, which was not such an alien concept for the author since Griffin had already encountered alienation. Blinded by a war injury in 1945, he had become familiar with functioning as the other, "pitied or abused, but denied individuality and treatment as normal by the sighted" (Reid 456). Thus, in a review for *The Telegraph* Tim Stanley describes Griffin as "a man determined to make the most of his second chance who hit upon the novel idea of crossing the colour line" ("The White Man"). The journey was inspired by Griffin"s examination of suicidal incidents among Southern blacks. Attempts to conduct a satisfactory survey were a failure – the editor of *Sepia* explained that "blacks knew a white, no matter how sympathetic, could never understand life as a black" (Reid 456). Thus, Griffin's choice of passing as a black was a form of performance art aimed at showing the underlying motivation of whites' treatment of blacks and its effects. What Reid interestingly notices is that "Griffin altered nothing but his skin color. He kept the same occupation, speech pattern and dress. His point was that a change in skin color alone altered the way whites responded to him" (Reid 457). The importance of changes in the body may be explained by the close interrelationship of traveling and the reality of flesh. As Hamera and Bendixen emphasize, "Mobility and corporeality are intimately linked. Perhaps it is no surprise that those relegated by white patriarchal elites to the status of wholly "body", as opposed to "mind", specifically here African Americans and women, address this interrelationship with special clarity in their travel writing" (7).

When embarking on the project, Griffin himself was suspicious of the process of passing for a black man. He writes the following:

> First I did not think I could possibly pass because, although I had the skin color, I did not have the kind of bone structure or facial conformation or color of eyes that we think of as "Negroid". Yet I did not have to be in the black community, as a black man, for more than an hour to see what I had never before noticed as a white man. (qtd. in Bonazzi 38)

As Bonazzi notices, Griffin's "perceptions had been blurred by the racist mythology of his Southern background" (38). However, the real experience of living in the black community proved his prejudices wrong. Griffin writes:

> I saw black people with every kind of bone structure, every type of facial conformation, and every density of pigment… I saw black people with blue eyes, with green eyes, with gray eyes. (qtd. in Bonazzi 38)

This kind of ignorance may be treated as an instance of *selective inattention,* which is described as

> that uncanny ability to perceive what one has been taught to misperceive, while screening out what is actually there. In effect, he [Griffin] had been taught to *think white* rather than to *be human,* to perceive the stereotypes rather than to see another human being … Their [whites'] selective inattention reinforced the stereotype that all black people looked alike, blindfolding them to any differentiation of detail. (38-39)

Interestingly, Griffin passed as a Negro to the first white man he encountered, and the two black men the author met next were not suspicious of his identity, either.

The very phenomenon of passing was not novel in American culture when Griffin initiated his project. Temporarily passing as an other could be considered "a universal fantasy and a not uncommon practice" (Reid 453). According to Reid, the literary genre of narratives describing the attempts of white middle-class individuals to act as the other has its roots in the "American faith in self-transformation in an effort to confront the social boundaries that define its limits" (Reid 453). The purpose is "revealing to their social group of origin its role in creating and sustaining the marginalization and oppression of the other whose identity they temporarily assume" (Reid 453). Again, intimate links with this autobiographical convention are emphasized. Reid notices that "writing a memoir is an integral element of returning from the experience of passing as an other. It involves a textual performance as the other, or, more exactly, performing the creation of the other as the product of the gaze and practices of the readers" world" (Reid 454). Thus, the proper narrative tools – e.g. apostrophes – are employed to „identify the primary audience as readers who share the author's racial and class identity of origin, a white middle class whose cultural blindness is revealed by the ease with which passers can pass as the other whom the white middle class employs, abuses, neglects, or refuses to see" (Reid 454). The possibility of involving oneself in a dialogic relationship with the inner otherness is also crucial. The same incentive is proposed to the assumed reader, who is encouraged to examine and possibly criticize his/her relation to the culture he/she belongs to.

> By passing as an other, temporarily abandoning the position of those who speak for the dominant culture and legitimate their position in terms of it, these authors hope to be better able to develop a critical perspective of their cultures of origin. "Passing" texts respond to a utopian desire in American culture to address as individuals the relation of the diverse to the divisive. (Reid 457)

As "memoirs of passing often conclude with the threat of retribution against those who passed for challenging taboos from the passer's society of origin, the reader is called to review his or her own culture and to take

a stand" (Reid 454). Indeed, the final entries in Griffin's memoir record the threats he and his family received after the completion of the project.

The series of threats were, however, a minor reflection of the overwhelming alienation Griffin encountered throughout his quest. As Tim Stanley notices

> By very dint of not being white – even if he wasn't exactly black – Griffin experienced genuine alienation. He was chased down a street by a bored white thug shouting racial epithets. He was told that he was sitting in the "wrong" waiting room and had to move to the "blacks only" one. On buses Griffin boarded via the backdoor, and when he chivalrously tried to offer his seat to a white woman he was accused of being "sassy". Many whites were polite; a few were aggressively rude. ("The White Man")

The memoir abounds in incidents of receiving the "hate stare", an aggressive glance quite often accompanied by real violence.

Nevertheless, some critics have not been willing to accept the veracity of Griffin's passing. In her essay "Black like Who? Cross-Testing the "Real" Lines of John Howard Griffin's *Black like Me*," Kate Baldwin uncovers the author's superficial blackness and, consequently, his failure in passing. First and foremost, Griffin as the white author is always in control of the rhetoric of Griffin as the black character. As Baldwin notices:

> Whereas Griffin's text claims that he "passed", what his text reveals are the anxieties of an author who did not pass, who perhaps even sensed the inevitable failure of passing in a world where there are no reliable measures of racial difference. (119)

While the author attempts to inscribe himself within a black persona, in his narrative his "whiteness" always persists in framing his blackness (Baldwin 114). The reader's perception of Griffin's race is based upon a misreading – the body is, according to Baldwin, an unreliable source for the revelation of his identity. Instead of bridging the gap, the narrative seems to emphasize the immanent difference between the whites and the blacks. The reader is constantly reassured that the color line forged by Griffin is superficial:

> Attempting to do away with race as a meaningful category through its claim that skin color makes no difference, this passing narrative repeatedly reminds us that skin color makes all the difference. (Baldwin 114)

The memoir's claim to truth is, according to Baldwin, based upon personal experience as well as first-person narration. *Black Like Me* may be described as Griffin's biography of the reformed: it is both affiliated to the American Christian tradition of conversion and to the American slave nar-

rative (itself a relative of the Christian confessional). Baldwin notices the superficiality of Griffin's transformation as he uses "black" as a synecdoche for "victim", and assures that Griffin remains a white who strives to become both the "victim" and the "savior" (Baldwin 118). The paradox of the project is visible both in the treatment of whiteness as affording invisibility and blackness as being discerned visually – denying invisibility. Griffin claims: "The Griffin that was had become invisible" (Baldwin 119). As Baldwin notices, this reality of blackness contradicts Griffin's presumption that skin color makes no difference, as if in contrast to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (the black man feels himself to be invisible). The essay emphasizes the safety that the memoir's narration strives to sustain – Griffin modulates the vocabulary so that it is never a full conversion, and always occurs in the past tense. Thus, Griffin the author uses white narrator's rhetoric.

As Baldwin asserts, the very title is symptomatic in tracing the superficiality of the memoir – it is not *Negro Like Me*, as if the color and culture were truly separate entities, and Griffin were the only "black" man who was not a second-class citizen. What contributes to the strict white identity/black identity separation is the fact that the first-person narrative employs third-person narration to describe the black self, thus strengthening the implied separation between the white observer and the black observed. Another dichotomy observed by Baldwin is the white woman/black woman difference. Griffin's wife functions as an index of the truth, whereas the black woman represents Griffin's connection to his false identity, his passage. Griffin feels emotionally detached from his wife, as he cannot bear the thought of his white wife contacting a black man: "the observing self saw the Negro write "Darling" to a white woman and the chains of my blackness would not allow me to go on" (qtd. in Baldwin 128). Clearly, the white man controls the perception as well as teaches the black man how to "see" blackness. Indeed, as Baldwin mentions, in the years leading up to his death, Griffin"s writing had taken on a despairing tone, for he had recognised the falseness of his own experiment. Reid could have been right when asserting that "Although Griffin may have been told things African-Americans would not have said to whites, he had limited access to black culture and could not have written *African-American like me*" (Reid 457).

Nevertheless, some critics appreciate the rhetorical strength of Griffin's memoir. In his essay "The Rhetorical Effectiveness of *Black Like Me*," Hugh Rank absolves potential weaknesses by quoting the memoir's preface, in which Griffin himself apologizes for its "crudity and rawness". Indeed, Griffin is conscious of the fact that his notifications may seem infantile, and perceives his observations naive, comparable to a child's (e.g., his sweat felt the

same as the "white Griffin"s"): "Again my reaction was that of a child. I was aware that the street smells, and the drugstore odors of perfume and arnica, were exactly the same to the Negro as they had been to the white. Only this time I could not go to the soda fountain and order a limeade or ask for a glass of water" (Griffin 18). Nevertheless, Rank asserts that despite the deceptive simplicity of an account that "can be read merely as a piece of popular journalism on a timely subject" (813), the durability of the memoir is achieved through intimate "writer-reader relationship and the ethos of the writer" (815). The reader is invited to participate emotionally in the described events, whereas Griffin is highly concentrated on the project, abandoning any claims to heroism or bravery. Diminishing the narrator's status through "humility and self-effacement" as well as assuming the role of an "undercover agent", embodying the universal fight between good and evil, also contributes to the constitution of a closer relationship with the reader: "Griffin's adventure in *Black Like Me* parallels that of the spy, the prisoner-of-war, or the "innocent prisoner" plotting alone, in secret, against the evil institution" (Rank 816). Another valuable aspect of the memoir is Griffin's constant being in motion, wandering the streets, riding buses, and resting in parks, hotels, or cafés. Even when he is not traveling, the readiness to start the journey is striking and contributes to the memoir's dynamism. This constant movement has its bitter dimension, too, being a sad necessity of a black person. After being "warned" to leave Jackson Square (later, Griffin discovers the blacks actually had a right to sit there), he notices: "It was walk constantly until you could catch a bus, but keep on the move unless you have business somewhere" (46). Later, Griffin bitterly remarks: "Again, an important part of my daily life was spent searching for the basic things that all whites take for granted: a place to eat, or somewhere to find a drink of water, a rest room, somewhere to wash my hands… No matter where you are, the nearest Negro café is always far away, it seems. I learned to eat a great deal when it was available or convenient when the belly next indicated its hunger" (97).

The conclusion that Rank proposes is highly commendable, for the critic states: "Whether one would emphasize his work in the French underground during the Second World War, his demonstrated musical ability as a pianist and musicologist (on Chopin), his philosophical research and writings (tutored by Jacques Maritain), or his ten-year period of blindness during which he wrote *The Devil Rides Outside* (a novel highly praised in Maxwell Geismar's *American Moderns*), the general conclusion would be that Griffin possesses not only a superior intellect but also is a man of rare courage, endurance, and integrity (816).

Undoubtedly, another aspect of the project that proves successful is Griffin's account of his final approaching the other and resulting re-examination of his "previously unacknowledged racism" (Reid 458). The initial attitude the author presents is stained with paternalism and "innocent", almost benevolent, racism. This was a natural consequence of Griffin's childhood in the South – Bonazzi describes his approach as "benign neglect and paternal prejudice" (6). Thus, throughout the journey the narrator attempts to identify with the other, attempts that manifests itself in the very preface. The apostrophe to a white person, asking for a witness to the authenticity of the testimony, may be treated as comparable to a preface to a traditional slave narrative written by a black person. However, in this case both the white authenticator and the black authenticated are the same person. The reader is entangled in the process of examining his or her own attitude towards the other, i.e. of noticing the individual contribution to creating and sustaining the status of otherness. As Reid notices, "The goal of those who pass and return is to show, along the lines of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, that the gaze of the oppressor constructs the most confining elements of identity" (467). Thus, the reader "will make sense of their experience of reading, as he [Griffin] could do of the experience of passing only when writing of it" (Reid 459).

The close textual analysis of the memoir may be divided into the themes Griffin covers. These are the project itself, the overwhelming loneliness, sense of otherness (in both external and internal dimensions), danger and cruelty, exposure of naivety, a common spirit initiated with the other, language's role in constituting and maintaining discrimination and alienation, humiliation, and, finally, consequences and outcome of the project.

In the very preface to *Black Like Me*, Griffin anticipates the possibility of inauthenticity, i.e. the possibility of questioning the validity or veracity of his testimony: "Some Whites will say this is not really it. They will say this is the white man's experience as a Negro in the South, not the Negro's" (6). Griffin emphasizes the universal dimension of oppression, which is going to be the prevalent issue the memoir will examine:

> The Negro. The South. These are details. The real story is the universal one of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men (and in the process destroy themselves) for reasons neither really understands. It is the story of the persecuted, the defrauded, the feared and detested. I could have been a Jew in Germany, a Mexican in a number of states, or a member of any „inferior" group. Only the details would have differed. The story would be the same. (6)

Those rational arguments are preceded by an excerpt from "Dream Variation", a poem by Langston Hughes, which includes a reflection of the mem-

oir's title: "Rest at pale evening.../A tall slim tree.../Night coming tenderly/ Black like me".

As far as the project itself is concerned, Griffin expresses his hesitation from the very beginning of the experiment; his doubts are shared with his friends and coworkers. *Sepia*'s editorial director, Mrs. Adelle Jackson

> felt that when my [Griffin's] book was published, I would be the butt of resentment from all the hate groups, that they would stop at nothing to discredit me, and that many decent whites would be afraid to show me courtesies when others might be watching. And, too, there are the deeper currents among even well-intentioned Southerners, currents that make the idea of a white man's assuming nonwhite identity a somewhat repulsive step down. (9)

The whole issue is carefully planned; the preparations include consulting FBI inspectors beforehand in order to discuss the project in detail. At that point, Griffin informs local policemen that he decided not to change his name or identity, considering the change of skin color enough. Indeed, initially the journalist is deeply satisfied with the success of his disguise: at the bus stop, on the bus, and at the shop he passes as black. The lack of recognition is most striking on the part of people he had encountered before the transformation.

What strikes the reader first as an obvious burden, blurring the initial satisfactory outcome of the operation, is the narrator's growing sense of loneliness. From a very early phase, Griffin anticipates the difficulty of emotional detachment. His attachments to white society, both family and friends, have been destroyed (the author suspects his wife and children would not even recognise him): "I felt the beginning loneliness, the terrible dread of what I had decided to do" (9). Great loneliness is shared with Griffin's wife, who offers her emotional and practical support, but who is nevertheless also condemned to some form of deprivation:

> And then I went home and told my wife. After she recovered from her astonishment, she unhesitatingly agreed that if I felt I must do this thing, then I must. She offered, as her part of the project, her willingness to lead, with our three children, the unsatisfactory family life of a household deprived of husband and father. (9)

The completeness of his physical transformation strengthened the sense of detachment by posing a striking contrast between the image of his white family and Griffin's darkened skin:

> Opening my eyes, I looked down at my hands and saw each dark pore, each black wrinkle in the hairless flesh. How white by contrast the image came to me of my wife and children. Their faces, their flesh simmered with whiteness

> and they seemed so much a part of another life, so separated from me now that I felt consumed with loneliness. (34)

The sense of alienation is linked with the experience of encountering the otherness – in both an external and internal sense. As mentioned before, the project was actually the second embodiment of otherness Griffin experienced. He recalls the experience of being an other – blind – while walking in the French Quarter of New Orleans: "Strange experience. When I was blind I came here and learned cane-walking in the French Quarter. Now, the most intense excitement filled me as I saw the places I visited while blind" (11). Griffin realised the consequences of his otherness very early after the transformation – when he called a friend who insisted that the journalist should stay at his house, Griffin felt relief, for he "foresaw all sorts of difficulties staying in a hotel while [he] turned into a Negro" (11). The first "other" Griffin decided to initiate close relationship with was Sterling Williams, the proprietor of a bustling shoeshine stand located on the edge of Jackson Square. Griffin confesses: "I decided he might be the contact for my entry into the Negro community" (14). The fact that Williams had not recognised his previously usual white customer (he recognised Griffin's shoes, but not their owner) was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Griffin's dermatologist after the treatment's completion: "Now you go into oblivion". Later, when sitting on the church steps at night, the journalist bitterly recalls the doctor's remark: "I wondered if he could have known how truly he spoke, how total the feeling of oblivion was" (40).

The internal otherness became evident immediately after Griffin's transformation, when he looked in the mirror:

> In the flood of light against white tiles, the face and shoulders of a stranger – a fierce, bald, very dark Negro – glared at me from the glass. He in no way resembled me. The transformation was total and shocking. I had expected to see myself disguised, but this was something else. I was imprisoned in the flesh of an utter stranger, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship. All traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence. (15)

Interestingly, that is the first moment in which Griffin anticipates his own underlying racism, the attitude he would later reveal to possess. The completeness of the change was both overwhelming and oppressing: "Even the senses underwent a change so profound it filled me with distress. I looked into the mirror and saw reflected nothing of the white John Griffin's past. No, the reflections led back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto, back to the fruitless struggles against the mark of blackness. Suddenly, almost with no mental preparation, no advance hint, it became clear and permeated my

whole being" (16). The dichotomy of the self became apparent. The division was between the observer and the observed – the subject and the object: "The completeness of this transformation appalled me. It was unlike anything I had imagined. I became two men, the observing one and the one who panicked, who felt Negroid even into the depths of his entrails" (16). The alienation was most vividly expressed in the lack of "companionship" Griffin declared he felt towards "this new person". At this point an intertextual allusion to Ralph Ellison's novel is made: "I had tampered with the mystery of existence and I had lost the sense of my own being. This is what devastated me. The Griffin that was had become invisible" (16).

The sense of the internal self's split repeats recurrently in the memoir. At some hotel Griffin stays at, he describes his encounter with the landlady: "As I looked up to thank her, I saw the image in the large mirror of the wardrobe. Light gleamed from the elderly Negro's head as he looked up to talk to the Negro woman. The sense of shock returned; it was as though I were invisible in the room, observing a scene in which I had no part" (36). This visual alienation is supported by the other senses. The internal otherness exhibits itself even in Griffin's voice, and his humiliation is expressed in the offensive words it shouts: "I heard my voice, as though it belonged to someone else, hollow in the empty room, detached, say: "Nigger, what you standing up there crying for?" … Then I heard myself say what I have heard them say so many times. "It's not right. It's just not right" (67). Again, the strange alienation from his wife is visible when Griffin is writing a letter, and is embarrassed by the inappropriateness of his addressing a white woman: "The observing self saw the Negro, surrounded by the sounds and smells of the ghetto, write "Darling" to a white woman. The chains of my blackness would not allow me to go on. Though I understood and could analyze what was happening, I could not break through" (69). After almost three weeks, the embarrassment is renewed – when Griffin calls home the strangeness of his situation strikes again. Although as he talks with his family he assumes the roles of a white husband and father, the reflection in the window points to the fakeness of those identities. The detachment from his original self becomes most unbearable in this particular moment: "At this time, when I wanted most to lose the illusion, I was more than ever aware of it, aware that it was not the man she knew, but the stranger who spoke with the same voice and had the same memory" (115).

This individual, internal split seems to parallel to the internal otherness within the race ("a double problem for the Negro"). Griffin explains: "First, the discrimination against him [Negro]. Second, and almost more grievous, his discrimination against himself; his contempt for the blackness that he

associates with his suffering; his willingness to sabotage his fellow Negroes because they are part of the blackness he has found so painful" (44). The lack of unity plaguing the black community is presented as one of its most significant problems. Mr. Gayle, with whom Griffin enters into a political conversation, states: "We work against one another instead of together … You have to be almost a mulatto, have your hair conked and all slicked out and look like a Valentino. Then the Negro will look up to you. You've got *class*" (35). The burden of the division is, nevertheless, supplemented by numerous depictions of manifestations of community spirit that Griffin observes. At the very first hotel where Griffin stays after the transformation, he gets involved in a conversation with other black men in the bathroom: "I told them good night and returned to my room, less lonely, and warmed by the brief contact with others like me who felt the need to be reassured that an eye could show something besides suspicion or hate" (21). The negative dimension of this "sense of community" is visible in the encounter with the racist rules on the bus, when Griffin considers giving his seat to a middle-aged white woman: "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 the Negroes behind me frowned disapproval. I realized 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" (24).

When first walking down the street in the black district, Griffin realizes the change of perspective he has achieved – now he belongs to the ghetto domain he has seen before from "the high altitude of one who could look down and pity" (22). Griffin notices a strong sensuality among his new companions, which he considers more bearable than the surrounding area itself: "Here hips drew the eye and flirted with the eye and caused the eye to lust or laugh. It was better to look at hips than at the ghetto" (22). Quite early, the validity of the project is questioned due to the disillusionment that strikes Griffin – he discovers the separation between the races is both physical and mental: "The whites seemed far away, out there in their parts of the city. The distance between them and me was far more than the miles that physically separated us. It was an area of unknowing. I wondered if it could really be bridged" (40).

He was constantly refused employment – "I wanted to discover what sort of work an educated Negro, nicely dressed, could find. I met no rebuffs, only gentleness when they informed me they could not use my services as typist, bookkeeper, etc." (41) – as well as the realization of his traveler's checks – „I began to feel desperate and resentful. They would have cashed a traveler's check without hesitation for a white man. Each time they refused me, they

implied clearly that I had probably come by these checks dishonestly and they wanted nothing to do with them or me" (51). In this way, Griffin realizes both the economic injustice and intense suffering of black people he starts to identify with: "Each new reminder strikes at the raw spot, deepens the wound. I do not speak here only from my personal reaction, but from seeing it happen to others, and from seeing their reactions" (48). Soon, he experiences the "hate stare". The feeling is described as inhuman unmasked hatred; however, the testimony reveals Griffin's underlying racism as well: "I stooped to pick up my change and ticket from the floor. I wondered how she would feel if she learned that the Negro before whom she had behaved in such an unladylike manner was habitually a white man" (53).

Nevertheless, Griffin strives to sustain his adopted blackness. When driving in his white friend's car, he confesses: "I was embarrassed to ride in the front seat of the car with a white man, especially on our way to his home" (72). At this point revelation strikes him that "here in America, in this day, the simple act of whites receiving a Negro had to be a night thing and its aura of uneasiness had to be countered by gallows humor" (72). Night itself plays a vital role in the narrative. Introduced by Hughes's poem (*Night coming tenderly/Black like me)*, night is presented as a comforting time when the whites stay at home and the threat is diminished. The natural environment of the black sky and stars confirms the black man's status as a human being, with the undeniable right to exist in the universe alongside his white companions. The bitter awakening comes from the people – "Men, better and wiser than the night, put me back into my place with their hate stares" (115).

Depictions of danger accompanying the experiment are frequent in the memoir. As early the preliminary visit to the dermatologist, Griffin keeps the plans secret to his white host in the South, in order to protect the friend: "I knew that he had no prejudices, but I nevertheless did not want to involve him in any way, since reprisals might be taken against him by bigots or by his associates, who might resent his role as my host once my story became known" (12). The doctor himself expresses his concerns: "We're willing enough to go all the way for them, but we've got this problem – how can you render the duties of justice to men when you're afraid they'll be so unaware of justice they may destroy you? – especially since their attitude toward their own race is a destructive one" (13). Indeed, at the completion point of the "treatment", the doctor seems to regret having cooperated in Griffin's conversion. The initial phase of the quest was accompanied with extreme anxiety. Griffin writes: "I telephoned home, but none answered. My nerves simmered with dread" (15). The stress is supplemented by the realization of the inevitability of his choice: "I had gone too far. I knew now that there is no such

thing as a disguised white man, when the black won't rub off. The black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been" (16). One of the vivid instances of real danger was the scene of pursuit by a white hooligan and the strikingly indifferent reaction of the couple in the street. The oppression was even greater because asking a police officer for help was impossible. His identification papers could be a source of an even greater burden – the accusation of stealing a white man's documents.

The level of threat described in the memoir is conditioned by geography – the deeper into the South Griffin travels, the more oppressed he feels. In Mississippi, Griffin's spirit is down, for he writes: "I knew I was in hell. Hell could be no more lonely or hopeless, no more agonizingly estranged from the world of order and harmony" (67). After returning to New Orleans from Montgomery, Griffin observes: "Despite the inequalities, I liked New Orleans, perhaps because I dreaded so the prospect of leaving once more to go into the Deep South, perhaps because it was, after all, so much better here than in Mississippi – though I understand that the rest of Louisiana is scarcely any better" (80). Indeed, during his journey further into the South, the threat becomes serious – to the point of possibly getting killed. When hitchhiking, Griffin writes: "When I opened the door I saw a shotgun propped against the seat next to his [driver's] knee. I recalled it was considered sport among some elements in Alabama to hunt "nigs" and I backed away" (99). The hatred is overwhelming in the attitude of the white drivers who give Griffin a lift. One of them "spoke in a tone that sickened me, casual, merciless. I looked at him. His decent blue eyes turned yellow. I knew that nothing could touch him to have mercy once he decided a Negro should be taught a lesson. The immensity of it terrified me" (102). Nevertheless, Griffin strives to lessen the image by forcing himself to picture the oppressor in his other social roles – a grandfather, a husband, a churchgoer. The motivation is to balance their relation: "He showed me the lowest and I had to surmise the highest" (102). Facing the burden of criticism against his newly acquired community (what prevail are the accusations of their assumed lack of morality), Griffin expresses his deep appreciation for black people's striving for a decent life: „Thinking about these things, the bravery of these people attempting to bring up a family decently, their gratitude that none of their children were blind or maimed, their willingness to share their food and shelter with a stranger – the whole thing overwhelmed me" (110). However, it may be argued that the act of somehow rationalizing the white driver's cruelty is in fact a sign of Griffin sustaining white solidarity. Indeed, alongside instances of discrimination against blacks, the memoir depicts numerous positive reactions of whites: "I deliberately

stopped many white men to ask the direction to Dryades in order to get their reaction. Invariably they were courteous and helpful" (33).

Nonetheless, the prevailing mood of the memoir is oppression. This also manifests itself in verbal communication. When listening to the conversation of two white women on the bus after one of them had rudely refused to accept the seat proposed to her by Griffin with the accusation that he had looked at her lustfully, Griffin observes: "I learned a strange thing – that in a jumble of unintelligible talk, the word "nigger" leaps out with electric clarity. You always hear it and always it stings. And always it casts the person using it into a category of brute ignorance" (25). The offensive terms proliferate: "He [Negro] does not become calloused to these things – the polite rebuffs when he seeks better employment; hearing himself referred to as nigger, coon, jigaboo; having to bypass available rest-room facilities or eating facilities to find one specified for him" (48). The role of language is mentioned again when Griffin introduces the reader to the concept of "silent language", which is learnt fluently by the black men: "He [Negro] knows by the white man's look of disapproval and petulance that he is being told to get on his way, that he is "stepping out of line"„ (45).

The overwhelming weight of humiliation permeates the story. One of the most remarkable examples is a scene when the driver would not let Griffin leave the bus. Finally, he is forced to walk eight blocks back to the stop he was originally supposed to get off at. At first, Griffin tries to justify the behavior again, emphasizing the fact it is not representative enough: "In all fairness, I must add that this is the only example of deliberate cruelty I encountered on any of the city buses in New Orleans. Even though I was outraged, I knew he did not commit this indignity against me, but against my black flesh, my color. This was an individual act by an individual, and certainly not typical" (47). That is an echo of the prevailing attitude of Griffin in the first week of the journey. He justifies the acts of discrimination, strives to diminish the cruelty, probably preserving his white "face" under the external transformation. Then, he acknowledges: "But this [courtesy of the whites] was superficial. All the courtesies in the world do not cover up the one vital and massive discourtesy – that the Negro is treated not even as a second-class citizen, but as a tenth-class one" (47).

Another striking scene during which the reader may almost feel the embarrassing stiffness of being humiliated is the moment of revelation Griffin experiences, when he realizes why the white drivers eagerly gave him lifts: their desire to examine a black man's sexual life: "All but two picked me up the way they would pick up a pornographic photograph or book – except that this was verbal pornography. With a Negro, they assumed they need give no semblance of self-respect or respectability… All showed morbid curiosity

about the sexual life of the Negro, and all had, at base, the same stereotyped image of the Negro as an inexhaustible sex-machine with oversized genitals and a vast store of experiences, immensely varied" (85). The reason they are deprived of the status of human is the strong conviction that the black man is a different species. One of the drivers seems to perceive Griffin as "something akin to an animal in that he felt no need to maintain his sense of human dignity, though certainly he would have denied this" (88). Surprisingly, Griffin's reaction is emollient again: "The silence rattled between us and I felt sorry for the reprimand that grew from me to him in the silence. I did not want this cruelty to him, since I knew that he showed me a side of his nature that was special to the night and the situation, a side rarely brought to light in his everyday living" (89). As far as humiliation is concerned, no hierarchy may protect the black man from facing cruelty, as Griffin notices a "democracy of humiliation" within the black community: "I have been told that many distinguished Negroes whose careers have brought them South encountered similar difficulties. All the honors in the world cannot buy them a cup of coffee in the lowest greasy-spoon joint" (97).

In *Black Like Me* numerous moments of revelation the author experiences intermingle with consideration of scientific data. When forcibly struck with the misery of black children ("It was thrown in my face. I saw it not as a white man and not as a Negro, but as a human parent. Their children resembled mine in all ways except the superficial one of skin color, as indeed they resembled all children of all humans. Yet this accident, this least important of all qualities, the skin pigment, marked them for inferior status" [110]), Griffin mentions anthropological arguments as well as the culturally rooted clichés behind racial discrimination and ethnic differences. His conclusion is unrelenting towards his own race:

> The two great arguments – the Negro's lack of sexual morality and his intellectual incapacity – are smoke screens to justify prejudice and unethical behavior… All the cherished question-begging epithets applied to the Negro race, and widely accepted as truth even by men of good will, simply prove untrue when one lives among them … When all the talk, all the propaganda has been cut away, the criterion is nothing but the color of skin. My experience proved that. (111)

Un-American character of racism is mentioned when relating an incident on a bus, when the black people were refused the right to use the toilet: "I sat in the monochrome gloom of dusk, scarcely believing that in this year of freedom any man could deprive another of anything so basic as the need to quench thirst or use the restroom. There was nothing of the feel of America here. It was rather some strange country suspended in ugliness" (62).

What Griffin also perhaps considers un-American is the reaction of the society – both black and white – to the outcome of his project. The hostility the whole family encounters is the multiplication of the hatred accompanying his six-week journey. Griffin describes the experience of regaining human rights as a "miracle" (no harrassment, no molestation, etc.). However, the miracle is „sour" – the courtesies of white men are conceived artificially after a period of experiencing the opposite attitude: "I ate the white meal, drank the white water, received the white smiles and wondered how it could all be. What sense could a man make of it?" (120). After the transformation back, Griffin feels otherness again – when accompanied by a black man in a hotel, he writes: "I gave him his tip, received his bow and realized that already he was far from me, distant as the Negro is distant from the white" (120). The author of *Black Like Me* is back into the whites' hypocrisy and ignorance, the lack of knowledge, and shallow communication: "They said they knew the Negroes, they had had long talks with the Negroes. They did not know that the Negro long ago learned he must tell them what they want to hear, not what is" (121). The memoir concludes with the assertion that the blackness stays immanent in its author identity: "Both Negroes and whites have gained this certainty from the experiment – because I was a Negro for six weeks, I remained partly Negro or perhaps essentially Negro" (156).

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