

Wolf in sheep's
clothing: the
unintended racism of
griffin's empathy



In John Howard Griffin's controversial 1962 memoir *Black Like Me*, white-man Griffin takes an anthropological and personal journey, posing as a black man in the deep south in an attempt to understand the black experience. Equal parts personal revelation and argumentation, Griffin tries to provide proof of pervasive racial discrimination and show that, through empathy, white people can change and begin to understand the experience of black people. The problem, however, is that Griffin himself does not change. The bad encounters he experiences at times provoke fleeting shifts in his identity and argument, but ultimately just contribute to the same misguided notion: the belief that by painting his skin black, Griffin can understand – and, therefore, speak to – a black person's experience. He begins to use the “we” pronoun to refer to the black community almost immediately after transitioning. As a result, he simultaneously dismisses and usurps the black identity, hurting his own identity of empathy and undermining his credibility to argue for racial equality. Griffin's purpose is well-intentioned and radical for its time. Nevertheless, his desperation to speak for black people ultimately just undercuts his argument of equal humanity and contributes to a counterproductive theme of imperialist sympathy in which the white man claims authority on the experiences of a marginalized people.

Immediately after changing his skin color, Griffin begins to use the collective “we” in reference to black people, implying that the simple dyeing of his skin allows him to speak for the black community as a whole. Within one day of becoming black-skinned, in what he himself sees as his “first intimate glimpse” into black life, Griffin declares, “We were Negroes and our concern was the white man and how to get along with him” (Griffin, 35). Not only

does he use his limited experience as a black man to define the “concern” of all negroes, but alienates himself from the “white man” he was just a few days ago. Furthermore, Griffin remains surprisingly-open about his “former” whiteness, not because he wants to emphasize a disparity between his internal identity and outward appearance, but because to him the fact that he “was once white” is inconsequential (35). For Griffin, the physical blackness of his skin gives him licence to call himself “wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been” and an immediate claim to the sense of “shame,” “fear,” and futility of the black experience (23).

Griffin's self-declared blackness gives him false license to act as a misguided voice for the black equality movement. Griffin's quest to empathize with the black community and argue that the white-man does not “have any God-given rights that [the black man] does not also have,” (though presumptuous), is well-intentioned (36). And, within its historical context, even brave. However, his argument does not survive the test of time, many new critics highlighting the ethical fallacies and problematic consequences that come when white men equate empathy with a fundamental understanding of a marginalized groups' experience. As the 2016 documentary 13th says, when white people “take the lead of a conversation [about black movements]...they inevitably create more repression” (Ana DuVernay). To John Howard Griffin, though, his experience “is what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down...not the white man's experience as a Negro in the South” (11). Ultimately, though Griffin is well-meaning in his goals, his inability to recognize the black experience as anything beyond black skin simply contributes to a subliminal racism that

hinders the fight for equality into the future. The insights into the black experience that Griffin does gain through his journey ultimately hold little weight because they come from a white man who refuses to acknowledge that his self-inflicted experience cannot fully represent that of a true black man.

Griffin's epilogue is characterized by a tone of hopelessness and diminishing agency, as he begins to lose a sense of empowerment. Rather than claiming that he undertook his "experiment," his quest to understand the black experience, he says it "was undertaken," using passive voice to describe the change he once wished to actively create. (175). This new sense of futility seems like genuine insight into the black man's struggle, insight into the inescapability of blackness and the negative connotations it carries.

However, even as Griffin finds this understanding, he continues to use the pronoun "we," never acknowledging that, unlike those born black, his blackness is not futile: he can, and did, become white again. Failing to recognize this disparity, Griffin undermines his persona of empathy and, therefore, the credibility of his argument.

History - black history especially - is no stranger to the trope of the well-meaning white man, the man who uses a contrived sense of understanding for the black man's struggle to advocate for his rights. And while white men with good intentions like Griffin certainly help to fight large battles against segregation and discrimination, they also remove black people from the dialogue. In doing this, they give false credibility to white politicians who verbalize their opposition to racism while also instituting subliminally-racist programs like the American prison system. Though Griffin attempts to

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cultivate an identity of empathy and then use this empathized-
understanding to argue against discrimination and general racism, he
ultimately just lends himself to a troubling historical trend in which
marginalized peoples are cut out of their own conversation.