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BLACK AND WHITE LIKE ME

ABSTRACT

John Griffin's classic on racism, *Black Like Me* (1960), provides an interesting text with which to investigate the development of a dialogical self. Griffin becomes a black man for only a short period of time, but during that time he develops a black social identity and sense of personal identity, that contrasts radically with his former white identity. When he looks into a mirror on several occasions he engages in a dialogue with himself, as both a black and a white person. At first these two identities are so different that there is no "sympathy" between them. But through his experience, he eventually overcomes the dichotomy of two opposing selves, and acquires a personal identity, neither white nor black, but just human. In this article, I trace the development of these dialogical selves and the emergence of this new human identity.

Key words: identity, racism, self, black, white

John Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1960/1996) is a recognized classic on racism. Late in 1959, in the midst of the early phase of the civil rights movement, when alienation between whites and blacks in the Southern United States was close to a peak, the white journalist changed the color of his skin to black and spent a month traveling in the South, experiencing first hand for that short period what the Southern black man experienced every day of his life. The journal of his experiences as a white man turned black provides a perspective of this black experience from someone who could directly experience the contrast between having a white and having a black social identity in the South.

In the present article I will look at Griffin's experience during that month when his skin was black, but he retained the memory of himself as a white man. What emerges during that time is a confrontation between two selves: the white man he was and the black man he has become. Even though Griffin's journal was edited after his trip, it authentically presents the narrative of a man initially confronted with two selves radically different from each other with no sympathy between them. Yet during the course of the month of being black he eventually learns to integrate these two selves into his personal identity as a human being. In doing so, the experience made it possible for him to make a unique contribution to the civil rights movement.

Although he was a white man before and after his adventure, for that one month he was a black man and experienced what it was like to have a black social identity. He had positioned himself in the social world of the Southern United States for a month as a man with black skin and merely by this change in skin color, he had acquired a black social identity that was recognized as such by both blacks and whites. While his experience as a black man was limited, it was enough for Griffin to be able to understand the black perspective in a way few other whites ever could.

From a dialogical theoretical perspective (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, 2001; Barresi, 2002), it is worth investigating how such a brief experience with a different skin color could have produced this profound change in his understanding of race relations in the Southern United States. While many American whites believe that they can be sympathetic with the black perspective, they see that perspective only from a “third-person” point of view. They see black experience from a white “first-person” position and perspective. This social and personal position is one that is external to black experience and limited in scope of what is even available to perceive from a third-person perspective of that experience (see: Barresi, 2002; 2004). They have no real contact from a first-person position with what it was or continues to be like to be black in America. Griffin was an exception, not because he was intentionally more sympathetic than other whites, but because he actually acquired knowledge from a first-person perspective about what it was like to be in the social position of a black person in America. The picture he saw was an ugly one and not one that he found only in the hate stares and racism of other whites. At the beginning of his journey he also found that ugly look of fear and dislike of a black man’s face, even in himself. However, in briefly living the life of a black person, he also discovered a camaraderie and mutual aid among blacks that he could not have perceived at all from his social position and identity as a white man.

Before his adventure, Griffin thought of himself as non-racist. Indeed, he was a professional writer about racism. However, his non-racism was only a rational perspective on racism, not an emotional one. It was only with his experience as a black man that he was able to overcome the emotional racism that he had unconsciously acquired as a white person living in a racist society. In order to do this he had to change his social position and identity in that society from the dominant cultural position of a white person to the subordinate position of a black person. The month in this changed social position seemed to revolutionize his experience of himself by providing a perspective on white and black society, which he had never seen before and could not imagine from his white position within that society. Prior to becoming black, he had always experienced black and white people from the dialogical position and point of view of a white man. From this dominant cultural “I-position” (Hermans, 2001) he had the first-person view of himself and other white people and a third-person view of blacks. He never experienced what it would be like to be black, and his imagination of the black perspective and I-position was

limited by what black people would say to him or how they behaved towards white people. He did not know what they actually experienced in the racist society, nor did he see how white people appeared to blacks. He was limited in experience to a first-person perspective of the white I-position in society, and a third person perspective of the black I-position. Imagination, while useful to some extent, did not provide a first-person perspective of the black I-position or a third-person black perspective of the white I-position (Barresi, 2002). By purposely changing his skin color to gain that experience, Griffin embarked on a dialogical adventure that made him come face to face with his own entrenched racism as well as a perspective on white and black society that he could never have imagined based on his own previous experience.

John Griffin's experience of himself in a dialogical manner, involving a white and black self, is best revealed in his detailed descriptions of various occasions when he looked at himself in a mirror and saw a black stranger he could not readily recognize as himself. The mirror provided a means for him to distinguish the white self of his past and the black self of his present circumstance, and how differently he experienced being these two very distinct and incompatible selves. In terms of the theory of the dialogical self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, 2001; Barresi, 2002), these two selves can be viewed as I-positions that Griffin adopts during the course of his experience, where his experience of himself from these two positions radically transforms both his general sense of self and his perception of white and black cultural positions.

When Griffin first faced himself as a black man in the mirror, he was shocked. He had been blackening his skin for days under sunlamps and through drugs, and he had just rubbed in a black stain and shaved his head. He had purposely avoided looking at himself in the mirror until he completed his work:

"Turning off all the lights, I went into the bathroom and closed the door. I stood in the darkness before the mirror, my hand on the light switch. I forced myself to flick on the switch.

In the flood of light against white tile, 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." (Griffin, 1960/1996, p. 15)

What Griffin saw was not himself but the face of the "other", the unknown black man, who the white person viewed with fear and distrust. Griffin came face to face not with himself but with his own unconscious racism. However, he also knew that the unsympathetic black person in the mirror was actually himself – a new black self he had created, but a black man however created.

"I looked in 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 advanced hint, it became clear and permeated my whole being. My inclination was to fight against it. 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 Negro, regardless of what he once may have been. I was a newly created Negro who must go out that door and live in a world unfamiliar to me. The completeness of this transformation appalled me." (pp. 15-16)

Thus recognizing that he was both black and white, becoming black because his physical appearance made him black, but still white because of his memories, he created a situation for dialogical confrontation between two selves:

"I became two men, the observing one and the one who panicked, who felt Negroid even into the depths of his entrails. I felt the beginnings of great loneliness, not because I was a Negro but because the man I had been, the self I knew, was hidden in the flesh of another." (p. 16)

The two selves, one who panicked, and one who was hidden in the flesh of another, could not be integrated into a single personal identity.

"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. The worst of it was that I could feel no companionship with this new person. I did not like the way he looked. Perhaps, I thought, this was only the shock of a first reaction. But the thing was done and there was no possibility of turning back. For a few weeks I must be this aging, bald Negro; I must walk through a land hostile to my color, hostile to my skin. ...

With enormous self-consciousness I stepped from the house into the darkness." (pp. 16-17)

Griffin's self-consciousness was at this time of a dual sort. On the one hand he was a white self, who was conscious of being in the strange unlikable body of the "other". On the other hand, he was a newly minted black self, about to enter into a world he hadn't experienced before, where the color of his skin would radically transform his way of experiencing himself. As a white self, he would have only a hidden, unobservable existence, seeing for the first time what the black world was like; as a black self, he would have a real, physical existence, one with unknown dangers, and rules he would have to learn quickly if he was to survive. These two selves and I-positions, though in dialogical relationship, were not yet on speaking terms. Griffin would flip from one to the other perspective, on the one hand watching with the curious interest of an observer the new world he was entering; on the other hand, experiencing first hand the black person's social identity in the Southern United States at that time and learning how to cope as a black person in that world.

A day later, in Griffin's second experience of looking at himself in a mirror it is his white observing self that stands out:

"I returned to my room and wrote in my journal. My landlady lit the fire and brought a pitcher of drinking water for my night stand. 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." (p. 37)

This second mirror experience contrasts sharply with a mirror experience nearly a month later, after having personally faced for that period the difficult life-style associated with having a black identity in the South:

"As I sat in the sunlight, a great heaviness came over me. I went inside to the Negro rest room, splashed cold water on my face and brushed my teeth. Then I brought out my hand mirror and inspected myself. I had been a Negro more than three weeks and it no longer shocked me to see the stranger in the mirror. My hair had grown to a heavy fuzz, my face skin . . . was what Negroes call a 'pure brown' – a smooth dark color that made me look like millions of others. I noted, too, that my face had lost animation. In repose, it had taken on the strained, disconsolate expression that is written on the countenance of so many Southern Negroes. My mind had become the same way, dozing empty for long periods. . . . Like the others in my condition, I was finding life too burdensome. I felt a great hunger for something merely pleasurable, for something people call 'fun'." (p. 116)

In this later scene Griffin still at first sees a stranger in the mirror, but he is no longer surprised because having become used to the I-position of a black person he now experiences himself as that stranger. He has become a Negro like many others facing the inequities of existence in the Southern United States, having a "strained, disconsolate expression" and a "hunger for something merely pleasurable". However, unlike other Negroes, Griffin did have a means of escape, and it is at this time that he decides not to take the pills that have helped to color his skin, and to make the gradual return to being white.

The time between these two opposing mirror experiences is the period when the two distinctively different selves meet in dialogue. This dialogic process reveals itself most clearly in Griffin's third encounter with a mirror. Griffin had chosen to leave New Orleans, where relations between whites and blacks, although strained, were fairly civil, for what seemed in comparison the wilderness of rural Mississippi. Recently, a black man, accused of raping a white woman, had been brutally taken from a jail and murdered. Although the FBI had gathered evidence on the white men involved in the act, the local Grand Jury refused to consider the evidence. When this decision was announced, the black community throughout the South was depressed and angry over it. Griffin decided it was time to move into Mississippi where the event occurred, and he passed through the town of the incident on the bus ride to Hattiesburg where he planned to stay the night.

"It was in Hattiesburg that night that he looked into the mirror for the third time:

Canned jazz blared through the street . . . I switched on the light and looked into a cracked piece of mirror bradded with bent nails to the wall. The bald Negro stared back at me from its mottled sheen. 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.

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?’

I saw tears slick on his cheeks in the yellow light.

Then I heard myself say what I have heard them say so many times. ‘It’s not right. It’s not right.’

Then the onrush of revulsion, the momentary flash of blind hatred against the whites who were somehow responsible for all of this, the old bewilderment of wondering, ‘Why do they do it? Why do they keep us like this? What are they gaining? What evil has taken them?’ (The Negroes say, ‘What sickness has taken them?’) My revulsion turned to grief that my own people could give the hate stare, could shrivel men’s souls, could deprive humans of rights they unhesitatingly accord their livestock.

I turned away from the mirror. . . .” (pp. 68-69)

In this encounter with his mirror image, it isn’t always clear which self is speaking or acting. Indeed, Griffin adopts a number of I-positions in this dialogue, including those beyond black and white selves. Initially, as in the first encounter, he sees his black self staring back at him, presumably experiencing the image from the point of view and I-position of his white self. Only now he appears merely as a bald Negro, not the fierce Negro of the first encounter, nor the elderly Negro he observed as if from a distance in the second encounter. However, his immediate comment is about being in hell, and at first it isn’t clear whether he is viewing the situation from his white or black identity and I-position. More likely, it is from an existential level deeper than either of these I-positions, as he experiences the isolation of being in neither category. The next comment is about hearing his own voice as if it were another person saying: “Nigger, what you standing up there crying for?” He had started to cry, and this hollow voice, with which he could not identify, had made the comment. This voice seems to represent the I-position of the generalized other, probably a black other given the language being used, rather than the I-positions of a personal self, either white or black. After noticing the tears of black image in the mirror and this comment from this generalized other, Griffin’s response to this question comes from his more personal black identity. He speaks in a voice he heard blacks use many times, but here clearly his own: “It’s not right. It’s not right.” This is followed by an emotional outburst of hate and revulsion against whites by his black self. However, this reaction is immediately followed by grief over white people’s treatment of blacks, where now he seems to shift to the I-position of himself as a white person. At this point he turns away from the mirror, perhaps because he cannot take more of the encounter between these two selves and radically different I-positions, at least while looking into a mirror.

Even so, the encounter continues in a different modality:

”I took out my notebook . . . and attempted to write . . . I tried to write my wife – I needed to write her, to give her my news - but I found I could tell

her nothing. No words would come. She had nothing to do with this life, nothing to do with the room in Hattiesburg or with its Negro inhabitant. It was maddening. All my instincts struggled against the estrangement. I began to understand Lionel Trilling's remark that culture-learned behavior patterns so deeply ingrained they produce involuntary reactions—is a prison. My conditioning as a Negro, and the immense sexual implications with which the racists in our culture bombard us, cut me off, even in my most intimate self, from any connection with my wife. . . .

The visual barrier imposed itself. 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 could not allow me to go on. Though I understood and could analyze what was happening, I could not break through.

Never look at a white woman - look down or the other way.

What do you mean, calling a white woman 'darling' like that, boy?" (p. 70)

In this scene the two selves and personal I-positions are in dramatic confrontation, with no possibility of integration. In pulling his journal out and in attempting to write to his wife, Griffin tries to adopt the I-position of his white self, who had initiated this entry into the black man's world, but who comes from a different, white world. But he can't escape the black social identity and self that he has acquired. The very idea of a black man writing to a white woman as his wife prevents Griffin from going on.

Whereas earlier his white I-position dominated his perception of himself, now it is his black I-position that dominates his thinking and actions as a self. He had been getting training as a black man for a while now, and had learned to inhibit white habits. For instance, on a bus, when an elderly white woman came on, who seemed tired and needed to sit down, he almost gave up his seat for her; but when he felt black disapproval, he, instead, sympathetically looked at her offering her the seat next to him. Instead of accepting the non-verbal offer, she remarked to him: "What're you looking at me like that for?" and made the general comment for her white audience, "They're getting sassier every day." (p. 25) In the meantime, the blacks on the bus were not as angry at Griffin as he thought they would be. Instead, they were astonished at him for being so stupid.

The two concluding comments of the quoted passage, the first from black sources telling him to look down, and the second from white sources, are examples of sexual rules that he has learned. In a famous case of racism in 1955 that helped initiate the civil rights movement, Emmet Till, an adolescent from Chicago, visiting relatives in Mississippi, had been killed because he did not have these habits and had looked with interest at a white woman. The husband of the woman and his friends had killed the boy. It is noteworthy that Griffin identifies two types of instructional voices, not just a generic white voice that might have come from prior knowledge of the white point of view but from a black one as well. The latter voice came from his memory of a warning given to him by a knowledgeable black as they entered Mississippi by bus. He was

told not “to even look at a white woman . . . you look down at the ground or the other way.” (p. 61)

By the time Griffin attempted to write his wife in Hattiesburg, he is beyond the initial period of learning how to behave as a black person. His acquisition of his black social and personal identity has become so encompassing for him that he can’t recover enough of his white self to write to his wife. The new habits of his black identity are too strong. The two identities exclude one another, especially in the arena of sexuality involving a white woman, and at this moment the habits of Griffin’s black identity are stronger than those of his white identity. So he cannot write to his wife because he experiences the chains of his black identity. Indeed, Griffin finds that he is unable to continue on with his experiment at this point in his travels. He needs a break from his lonely “hell,” and he does it by contacting a white journalist friend who lives in Hattiesburg. The friend picks him up and Griffin stays with him for a day before returning to his travels alone as a black man.

If this incident in Hattiesburg is the low point in dialogical relations between Griffin’s white and black selves, because each I-position necessarily excludes the other, in many ways the high point in dialogical relations between these two selves and I-positions occurs when he is actually able to connect his past life as a husband of a white wife and a father of white children to his present life as a black man. Earlier in his journal, not long after turning black he looks at his black hands and reflects:

”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 by loneliness.” (pp. 34-35)

That contrast between his blackness and their whiteness had become worse in the scene in Hattiesburg. But the relation between his past white life and his current black life takes a crucial upward turn when he meets and stays at the home of a very poor rural black family in Alabama, after leaving Mississippi. He was hitch-hiking and after being picked up by various white drivers with prurient interests in black sexuality, he finally gets picked up by a black man returning home after work. The man offers to let Griffin stay with him and his family for the night. The family is in many ways like Griffin’s own family, with several children close in age to his own. He talks with the family about his own family and of his daughter’s birthday that day. One of the girls wonders if his daughter’s birthday party would be much like the party they had – with the cut-up pieces of chocolate that they shared – Griffin’s contribution to their simple meal of beans. He said that yes, it would be similar. But this led to more reflection and later he was up alone crying, thinking about the two families, and about how a mere difference in skin color would so much determine the fates of the children in the white and black families.

”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. It became fully terrifying when I realized that if my skin were permanently black, they would unhesitatingly consign my own children to this bean future.” (p. 112)

It is at this point that Griffin gets beyond the duality of his black and white identities. Up until that time he couldn't integrate the two selves and I-positions. He could view himself from a white perspective and I-position or a black perspective and I-position, but not from a human perspective and I-position that ignored, or rather subsumed, the two very different social identities and selves. But in this reflection on the two families, he is able to think of whites and blacks, including the self he might be in either role, not in terms of physical and social identity, but merely as a human parent, with human worries over what the future might hold for his children.

In reflecting on the emotional insight gained from this experience of common parenthood of black and white experience, Griffin later wrote in his final essay on racism:

”The emotional garbage I had carried all those years - the prejudice and the denial, the shame and the guilt - was dissolved by understanding that the Other is not other at all.

In reality, the Us-and-Them or I-and-Thou dichotomies do not exist. There is only one universal We - one human family united by the capacity to feel compassion and to demand equal justice for all.

I believe that before we can truly dialogue with one another we must perceive intellectually, and then at the profoundest emotional level, that there is no Other - that the Other is simply Oneself in all the significant essentials.” (Griffin, 1979/ 2006, p. 212)

That the human level of integration that he felt in this experience didn't produce a forgetting of the color barrier between black and white, but may have helped him in relating to his own family, though he was black, is indicated by his capacity now to call his wife. Not long after the mirror scene where he describes himself as having the “disconsolate expression” of many Southern blacks, he calls his wife in a phone booth:

”When my wife answered, the strangeness of my situation again swept over me. I talked with her and the children as their husband and father, while reflected in the glass windows of the booth I saw another man they would not know. 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 a stranger, who spoke with the same voice and had the same memory” (p. 118)

Nevertheless, he was happy at least that he had heard his family's voices, even under these circumstances.

It is interesting that not only is he successful here in calling his wife, even as a black man, and despite the sexual implications of the call, but also that he notes it is his wife who would not know the stranger. He doesn't say that he cannot recognize the stranger as himself. He seems to have blended enough here with his black identity that he can identify with his black appearance as

himself, though when looking at himself through his wife's eyes, through her I-position rather than his own, he cannot see himself in the black man that appears before him.

This was the last time Griffin reports seeing his mirror reflection as a black man. His next reported use of a mirror is to inspect himself after his attempt to scrub himself clean of the black color, so that he could try passing once again into a white identity (p. 120). But this was not the last time he was black. Not long after, while in Montgomery, Alabama, the city where the bus boycott got the civil rights movement started, he played a game of switching back and forth between his two identities, through the use of dyes. He noticed:

"I was the same man, whether white or black. Yet when I was white, I received the brotherly-love smiles and privileges from 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." (p. 125)

Griffin was now used to experiencing both of these identities and, through his experience as a black man for a month, knew what the transformation from one to the other identity tended to produce in the behavior of white and black others. He also now knew how to change his own behavior to respond appropriately to either context. When he left his black identity for the final time after having pictures taken in New Orleans, where he had started his journey, Griffin remarks:

"I resumed for the final time my white identity. I felt strangely sad to leave the world of the Negro after having shared it so long – almost as though I were fleeing my share of his pain and heartache." (p. 143)

Yet, in a sense, even though Griffin gave up being black, he did not give up his share of the pain and heartache of the black. He suffered as a white man who, when he went public with his story, was viewed by many of his Texas neighbors as someone who "turned against" his race. A sign was posted outside of a local racist bar, "No albinos allowed." Griffin found the sign amusing, but did not find the cold treatment that his family received amusing. He eventually moved to a larger city. He also shared the pain later in the civil rights movement, when he was called upon to help explain and deal with black resentment and the ghetto riots of the 60s. His role here was important because he could see both sides of the controversy in a way few people could. Often his task was merely one of making clear to whites that their problem was that they were asking him what to do instead of asking the blacks of their own cities what to do. They had more faith in a stranger from elsewhere if he was white, than any black leader in their own city. But it was from those very black leaders that Griffin found out what the problem was, and how best to begin solving it. Whereas most whites were blind to their own unconscious racism, Griffin had been there, and he had come out of it with a more self-conscious and wider perspective on the problem of white racism.

In attempting to appreciate the significance of Griffin's journey as a black man in the South, it is important to realize that, when the distance between

self and other is sufficiently great that one is never in the position of the other, normal sympathy or empathy can only get one so far in understanding the other (see Barresi, 2002). Without actually experiencing another person's perspective and dialogical I-position first hand, all one can do is imagine that perspective and I-position using the resources of one's own experience. However, that experience is always a third-person perspective with respect to the other's position and first-person perspective with respect to one's own. Without ever being placed in the position comparable to that of the other, what is missing is first-person experiential knowledge of the other's I-position as well as a third-person experiential knowledge of one's own I-position. Without such experiential knowledge imagination of changed positions with the other is necessarily limited.

Griffin wanted to move beyond being a sympathetic white observer of black racial problems in the Southern United States. So he set out to gain the first-person experience that blacks had in order to better understand their view, not just from a third-person perspective, but from a first-person perspective as well. In this he succeeded only too well; for in becoming the other, at least for a while, he almost lost his previous self. But in the end he gained not only the perspective of the other, but also an overarching human perspective and I-position from which he could appreciate, to an extent not previously experienced, how things looked from either more limited point of view. Even though he was still a white man, with a history that would never make him a black man, his range of empathy was expanded by his experience as a black man, so that he could contribute importantly to improved relations between whites and blacks in America.

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