

Outside Voices Examine Jim Crow

By Marshall N. Surratt

Overview

Students analyze the civil rights issues in John Howard Griffin's autobiographical *Black Like Me*. They will examine Griffin's book as an "outside voice" commenting on Jim Crow and segregation. Intended as a post-reading activity, this lesson offers a variety of choices for extended student research.

Curriculum Standards

For a list of standards that this unit addresses, [click here](#).

Time Required

This lesson should last approximately one week.

Materials Needed

Books:

- *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin
- *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee

Essays:

- George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant"
- Overview of *Black Like Me*, [included here](#).

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

Have students prepare a list of questions to ask a group of other students, ensuring that their criteria fairly depict the group they will observe. Among the issues they should consider and answer for themselves as they prepare their lists are:

- What are the difficulties does an outsider meet when chronicling the problems or obstacles facing another group?
- If you were making a video documentary about a group of other students in your school, what preparations would you make and what questions would you ask?
- In selecting questions to ask and people to interview, and in editing the video, how would you make sure you fairly represent the group?

Procedures

1. Have students read the overview essay of *Black Like Me*, **included here**. Then, have the class follow up their reading with a discussion to clarify the points in the essay.
2. Next, pick from the following topics--or allow students to choose one--to further their comparative study on *Black Like Me* within a historical context.

A. The writer of conscience as an outsider

Have students find a copy of Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant" (or, for those who are particularly ambitious, Orwell's later documentary books *The Road to Wigan Pier*, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, or *Homage to Catalonia*) and compare it to Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Then, have students answer the following questions:

- In each of the readings, how successful was the author in getting close to the people he depicts?
- How successful do you think Orwell or Agee was in honestly depicting the lives of those around him? What are the problems authors face when writing about experiences different from their own?
- How would you compare Orwell's or Agee's work with that of Griffin?
- How can we judge a work of literature about a serious social issue?
- Can the writing's political value ever outweigh any deficiencies in its literary merit? Or, does a writer need to write good literature for readers to pay attention to the message?

B. The threat of violence

Griffin writes about the lynching of Mac Charles Parker. At the time, the FBI interviewed witnesses and suspects, but the Pearl River County Grand Jury refused to return any indictments. The original FBI documents are available online. Instruct students first to examine these and then take roles as prosecutor and grand jury. Students could also research the subsequent charges brought against those involved in the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

Possible resources for students include these links:

- IFBI -- Freedom of Information Act -- Mac Charles Parker
<http://foia.fbi.gov/parker.htm>
- Six Dead After Church Bombing
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/churches/archives1.htm>
- Online NewsHour: The Birmingham Church Bombing
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/media/clarion/kc_birmingham.html
- Online NewsHour: Justice in Alabama
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/law/jan-june01/alabama2_05-02.html
- In New South, a bid to redress old crimes
<http://www.csmonitor.com/durable/2000/06/07/fp1s3-csm.shtml>

- Online NewsHour: Guilty Verdict in Church Bombing Trial
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/engenda_preview/updates/birmingham_05-22-02.html

They can also see:

- American Lynching
<http://www.americanlynching.com>
- The Press and Lynchings of African Americans
<http://academic.csuohio.edu/perloffr/lynching>

Once they've researched their topics, students should answer the following:

- Who is justice for, the victims and their families or the community at large--or both?
- Does anything happen to a community when justice is denied or delayed?

C. **Jim Crow and Public Transportation**

It isn't just as a plot structure that Griffin writes so much about riding buses. Access to public transportation was important to African Americans, who often depended on such to get to work or to visit family. The Alabama Department of Archives and History has a lesson plan on the Montgomery bus boycott and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s strategy for change through nonviolent protest.

D. **The Press and Jim Crow**

Griffin criticizes newspapers for fostering stereotypes of blacks as threatening or dangerous. At one point, he remarks: "Southern newspapers print every rape, attempted rape, suspected rape, and 'maybe rape,' but outstanding accomplishment is not considered newsworthy." (94) But, he also praises those few white journalists who wrote about Klan activities or other threats against blacks. (137) Instruct students to look up the lives and work of journalists such as Hodding Carter, P. D. East, Ralph McGill, and Hazel Brannon Smith.

Students then will answer the following:

- What was the approach of each?
 - Was it cautious or aggressive?
 - Do you think any should have been more aggressive?
 - Which of the journalists suffered financially for their political opinions?
3. Alternatively, have students look up old issues of a local mainstream newspaper from the 1930s to 1950s and answer these questions:
- How many articles mention blacks?
 - What terms are used (colored people, Negroes, blacks, African Americans)? How are blacks depicted?
 - Are any notable achievements mentioned?

- How many references are to charges against blacks as opposed to achievements?
- Are courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss) used consistently for whites and blacks?
- Does the coverage change over time, particularly after the 1954 Supreme Court desegregating schools?
- Examine the editorials on segregation. Even more liberal white editors and publishers (and some black editors and publishers) often practiced a cautious approach to speaking out for Civil Rights.

Then, for comparison, have students read the **Black Press Overview Essay** view the map of **African-American newspapers**. For instance, they can find articles and editorials at the following online resources:

- *Louisiana Weekly*: Griffin quotes from the *Louisiana Weekly* (50), which is still published. Recent articles are available online.
<http://www.louisianaweekly.com>
- *The Reflector*: This is an African-American newspaper published in Charlottesville, Virginia, from 1933 to 1935. Students should note that the publisher's language is polite--even when he feels particularly outraged, he uses understated satire. They can read, for example, "Alabama's Contribution to Civilization," an editorial against the mob killing of two black prisoners in Alabama in 1933. They can find some articles and editorials at the web site below.
<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vcdh/afam/reflector/newreflector.html>
- Online NewsHour: Clarion Call: This is a special report on present-day coverage in the Jackson, Mississippi Clarion Call that prompted reopening civil rights cases.
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june02/clarion_5-6.html

Finally, students should answer these questions:

- What do you think was the purpose of this approach?
- Do you think it is effective?

Assessment

Students will present their research and findings.

Primary Works

Agee, James and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, (1941), 1960. Paperback, 1980.

Griffin, John Howard. *Black Like Me*. New York: Signet, (1961), 1996.

Orwell, George. "Shooting An Elephant." *An Age Like This, 1920-1940, vol. 1 of The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*. ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. New York: Harcourt, 1968.

Orwell's essay is also available in other collections of Orwell's writings and in general literary anthologies.

Other Works Cited

Haley, Alex and Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, 1965. Rpt. New York: Ballantine, 1992.

Huey, Gary. *Rebel With A Cause: P. D. East, Southern Liberalism and the Civil Rights Movement*. Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1985. **Related Works**

Lynchings

Allen, James, ed. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. n.p. Twin Palms Publishers, 2000.

Dray, Philip. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: Random House, 2002.

Smead, Howard. *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

The Southern Press and Jim Crow

Davies, David R., ed. *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

Kneebone, John T. *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

Waldron, Ann. *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books, 1993.

Whalen, John. *Maverick Among the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Xlibris Corp, 2002.

Other

Stott, William. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Credit

Most outspoken of the group was probably P. D. East, who published the **Petal Paper**, a newspaper in Petal, Mississippi. (In **Black Like Me**, Griffin finds overnight refuge in P. D. East's home.) East is perhaps best known for an ad he published in March 1956 in the **Petal Paper**. In jest, he called for readers to join the Citizens Clan (a parody of the Mississippi Citizens' Council). The ad pictured a braying jackass in the upper left corner and announced: "Yes, YOU too can be SUPERIOR. Join The CITIZENS CLAN and BE SAFE from SOCIAL WORRIES!" The ad then listed benefits of membership, including "Freedom to yell 'Nigger' as much as you please without your conscience bothering you...Freedom to take a profitable part in the South's fastest growing business--Bigotry... [and] FREEDOM TO BE SUPERIOR WITHOUT BRAIN, CHARACTER, OR PRINCIPLE!" (The ad is reproduced on the dust jacket of Gary Huey's *Rebel With A Cause: P. D. East, Southern Liberalism, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1953-1971*.)

You can find a brief biography of P. D. East at the Web site for the University of Southern Mississippi, which holds some of East's papers:
<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~archives/m324.htm>

Further, the text of a letter from the Citizens' Council warning about anti-segregation efforts of both P. D. East and Ralph McGill is available online in the archives at the University of Mississippi:
<http://dm.olemiss.edu/archives/98/9804/980421/letter.HTML>

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