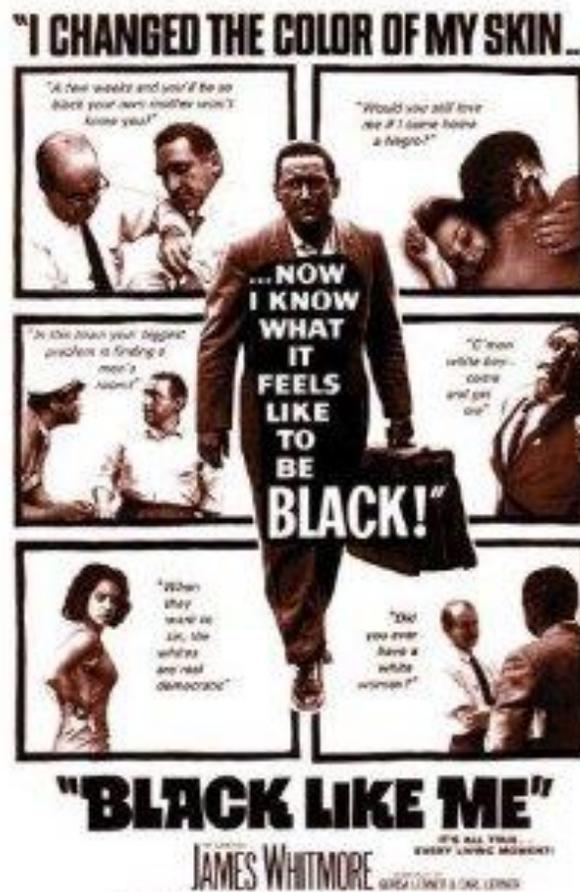


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Explaining Prejudice with Merton's Typology and the Film *Black Like Me*

by Teresa A. Booker



Carl Lerner's 1964 film, *Black Like Me*, tells a true story based on the autobiography of John Howard Griffin, a Caucasian man who chemically changed his skin from white to black in order to experience life as a black man. The film traces his "experiment" across the South as he interacts with both blacks and whites. This movie can be used to explain privilege, differences between prejudice and discrimination, and how societies behave as they do.

According to Merton's typology, people are either prejudiced or unprejudiced, and they either do or do not discriminate. This reality results in four types of predictable behavior. An individual who is neither prejudiced nor discriminates is an all-weather liberal. One who is not prejudiced but will discriminate if socially pressured to do so is a reluctant liberal. A person who is prejudiced but, nevertheless, does not discriminate (i.e., if it costs him anything or if he is socially pressured *not* to do so) is a timid bigot. An all-weather bigot is prejudiced and discriminates.

When I used the film in my Race and the Urban Community class at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, it was interesting to observe the reactions of mostly black and Hispanic Millennials move from incredulity, to astonishment, to outrage as they witnessed the protagonist travel from state to state, encountering antagonists who felt free to say anything to him—from presuming a preference for white women, to asking to view his genitalia.

Examples of all of these types of individuals are illustrated in the film, but only a few will be mentioned here. For example, the protagonist, John, is obviously an all-weather liberal since he has voluntarily manipulated his body and given up his white privilege in order to become a second-class citizen, merely to recount a newsworthy perspective. So, too, however, are the majority of blacks who interact with him, in addition to a white man who picks up a hitchhiking John and offers him a donut. In contrast, the white grocery store manager—who refuses to even consider offering John any job other than that of stocker—is a reluctant liberal. Despite John's suggestion that black customers would be happy with the manager's decision were John hired as a cashier, the manager kowtows to potential white backlash and refuses to even symbolically accept John's application. Alternatively, the gas station manager who employs John is a timid bigot when he shrewdly but indirectly accuses John of stealing money from the register. The elderly black waitress is, too, when she recounts her conversation with a white woman in which she states that the black race "gave birth" to the white race, not the other way around. Examples of all-weather bigots include the two strangers who chase John

through deserted streets; the female window clerk at the bus depot who doesn't want to break a ten-dollar bill, claiming not to have change; and the potential employer who tells John to his face that he doesn't give "white men's jobs" to blacks.

Black Like Me is far from being a perfect film. The fact that it is forty years old and filmed in black and white may disinterest some students. The cosmetics used to make the actor's white skin appear black is amateurish, in light of modern cinematic advances, and the audience must suspend belief in order to ignore the fact that the actor portraying John has blue eyes.

When I used the film in my Race and the Urban Community class at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, it was interesting to observe the reactions of mostly black and Hispanic Millennials move from incredulity, to astonishment, to outrage as they witnessed the protagonist travel from state to state, encountering antagonists who felt free to say anything to him—from presuming a preference for white women, to asking to view his genitalia. When I explained to students, afterwards, that from the 1890s until as late as the 1950s or 1960s, the primary reason for the lynching of black men was their alleged raping of white women, the antagonists' queries took on new meaning.

On a micro-level, students were able to observe how race is socially constructed, distinguish between prejudice and discrimination, identify stereotypes and examples of white privilege, apply Merton's typology to characters, and witness an extraordinary example of the self-fulfilling prophecy. On a macro-level, they were able to use the functionalist theory to explain how the marginalization of blacks was due to a *Southern* consensus which specified where blacks could (and could not) sit, eat, and sleep, with whom they could fraternize, and how they must address whites. Equally important was that whites knew it, too. While some social norms were "agreed upon" via Jim Crow laws, other behavior was clearly tacit—such as the unofficial prohibition of a black person from even *inflecting* his/her voice while speaking to a white person. Students were similarly able to use conflict theory to explain the struggle over ideas, beliefs, and resources between groups of unequal power. In the film, when a Southern black person was asked a question, the appropriateness of the answer depended upon the race of the intended recipient. Minimal, straight-to-the-point answers were offered to white folks, and "the real deal" (i.e. answers meant to assist, enlighten, and perhaps, even, entertain) was compulsory for black folks.

On a micro-level, students were able to observe how race is socially constructed, distinguish between prejudice and discrimination, identify stereotypes and examples of white privilege, apply Merton's typology to characters, and witness an extraordinary example of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Finally, students were able to use a critical race theory perspective to explain how some citizens were marginalized legally and in a myriad of ways due to a racist society. For example, John is willing to change his skin and go undercover to highlight inequity because he believes that a portion of American society is unjust. Over the course of his travels, he discovers that there are *de facto* safe and unsafe places everywhere. Random blacks are the targets of random whites with the former having such low expectations for legal reprieve that they don't even bother reporting the crimes. Moreover, the only safe housing for visiting blacks is either guest lodging within private residences or segregated housing—both of which legally exist on the “other side” of town because of either state law or city zoning ordinances. Similarly, when seeking out “white people’s jobs” (as one defiant employer puts it), John encounters one obstacle after another that

can only be defined as systemic and sustained by custom, if not altogether by law. In short, the system discourages blacks from complaining about mistreatment, relegates them to live in blighted communities, and prevents them from transcending their lot in life.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/press/).