Segregation: A Crime against Equality

In the world of segregation, most whites did not view African Americans as their equals. Rather, African Americans were viewed as a lower class not worthy of the lifestyles enjoyed by white Americans. When John Howard Griffin, a white man, placed himself in the shoes, literally, of an African American, he discovered that skin color usually determined the way people would live their lives under segregation. In the book he wrote, he claims, “I learned within a very few hours that no one was judging me by my qualities as a human individual and everyone was judging me by my pigment.”¹

Verbal reminders, physical body language, and double standards enforced the principles of segregation and were intertwined in the social interactions and culture of America in the era of the civil rights movement.

Time and time again hate slurs, insults, and verbal abuses were thrown at African Americas as a constant reminder that they were considered a lesser individual. As Robert F. Williams, an African American leader, explained, “I returned to civilian life in 1955 [after being enlisted in the United States Marine Corps] and the hope I had for Negro liberation faltered. Acts of violence and words and deeds of hate and spite rose from every quarter.”² African Americans were followed almost everywhere they went by verbal reminders of their skin color. John Howard Griffin experienced cat calls and threats of violence and hate everywhere he traveled in the South with his darker skin. In one instance a young boy from the street followed Griffin calling him offensive names.

Griffin recalls “the boy’s words: Mr. No-Hair, Baldy, [and] Shithead.” The only
provocation to this boy was Griffin’s darker skin color. Some reminders of the inequality
were more well-mannered yet still served to reinforce segregation. In areas where
African Americans were not welcomed, they would be, in most cases, verbally told to
leave. It is “the attitude of [most white] American people of ‘Oh, well, they are not the
same as us’” that the African Americans must hear and face every day. Verbal
reminders came in many forms, each providing a reinforcement of segregation through
social interactions.

Many whites displayed threatening and hurtful body language towards African
Americans. In Griffin’s experiment he encountered what African Americans called “the
hate stare.” He describes the hate stare as “withering horror…[making] you feel lost,
sick at heart before such unmasked hatred.” He encounters this hate stare multiple times
throughout his experiment, further convincing him that body language was a
reinforcement of the inequality between African Americans and whites.

Double standards were the basis of segregation. These included the additional
steps African Americans were required to take in order to vote and the amount of
violence that was tolerated from each group. White men would not be punished beating
an African American man, or assaulting an African American woman. On the other hand,
white men could murder an African American man for a few cat calls to a white woman
with little fear of punishment. Separate but equal in segregated facilities was deemed
constitutional by the Supreme Court, as

3 Griffin, Black Like Me, 36.
4 Linda Allison, “Letter to The Times,” The
5 Griffin, Black Like Me, 50.
6 Ibid., 51.
7 Williams, “We Must Fight Back,” 111.

“Ibid.” means it came from the exact same source as the one above (in this case, Griffin).
could easily be seen in the difference of quality and cleanliness of southern rest stops. This is a prime example of the poor conditions African Americans had to live with because segregation was enforced.

Double standards, physical body language, and verbal reminders are all principles of segregation that enforced inequality. Time and time again they were reinforced through social interactions African Americans had with most of white society. Unfair and hurtful, these principles of segregation dictated the lives of many African Americans throughout the civil rights era, leaving them with only the hope and will to fight for their rights and freedom.


