

Part C: John Howard's Tone Deafness in *Black Like Me*

As I have described to you before I would consider myself outside Max Weber's iron bars. The reason being in my natural critical thinking skills. We all have unique things about our childhood or youth that we never even thought about it possibly being different for others. What I found out when I was older is that a lot of people do not know how to do this and that critical thinking was something that required teaching. This leads to never ending arguments of course, especially when I was a child. My worst emotions would be super charged when I would get into a dispute with someone over something they never once actually thought about. Something that's promoted as a benefit of ADHD is having a different perspective. This comes from our unique world view growing up. My different perspective of *Black Like Me* is that John Howard makes himself come off as an inconsiderate-tone deaf privileged member of society and the hostile reactions to the *Sepia* articles were bound to happen.

Now first the problem with being tone deaf is that it leads to people making assumptions and then negatively affecting a scenario. Sometimes even when someone is pondering about problems and has knowledge in the area they still have their ideas based on a foundational mistruth. On the first page of *Black Like Me* John asks "How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth?" (Griffin, 1996: 1). Well for immediate example the people who learned from reading this book. The book begins with John describing his work life and how the conflict between the races keeps getting brought to his desk. The beginning he shows how involved he is with the privileged class. This privilege extends beyond race, he is a journalist who is close friends with the owner of a publishing journal. He takes the time to

mention in his writing that his entire trip would be completely paid for if he simply wrote an article for him about it (Griffin, 1996: 2-3). It's his disposition in these scenarios that show that he has never been on the less privileged side. Why would the *Sepia* owner pay for all this? Must be expensive adding the medical costs. Well for promotion of their journal of course. John and his friend George Levitan are planning to offend a multitude of people for their eventual profit in life. All press is good press.

Although I would say John's question on page one is minorly offensive it perfectly demonstrates Weber's theory of verstehen. Nearing the end of the book when he is getting several calls about his articles he is being asked from white leaders on how to know about who black people respect. Now if you asked John this question before the experience he would not be able to give you an answer. Maybe become a black man for a month and then think about it? Thankfully John is able to answer this on page 180 "Ask black people-ask a lot of black people,' I advised." (Griffin, 1996: 180). There are many things you do not have to experience to understand. The bus example from part b, did he not expect black people to feel bad about casually being called a slur? Not sure, but given the history of their ancestors being ordered as a slave by that name it seems not just maybe but more than likely offensive. There was added insult as well with how casual it was thrown around.

The rudeness that came from John's first page quote was in this assumption that you couldn't just ask black people questions and get honest answers. Especially given that there were black leaders in this time, he mentions Martin Luther King at a point. It's completely ridiculous

to someone like me that the person who was considered the defender of black people had such a low attitude for them. To me it seems that he went into the project with the racist view that black people are worse than him. In modern day people take this meaning to physical capabilities and intelligence tests but those are physical traits, and we do look different. But who they are as a human is continually degraded when they aren't even assumed to speak the truth. It reminds me of when I used to get in trouble at school as a child. My mom would say that she wishes she could have a fly on the wall with a camera to see what's really going on when I get into arguments. Why do you need a camera mom? I just told you, do you think so little of me that you don't trust my word? Anger fueling because to me I was always defending myself.

John realized fairly early on that a white man can simply go and talk to a black man. Not only that he saw that they were willing to go out of their way to help him. In the same chapter as the hateful experience on the bus he was shown the light. He exposed his true identity to a black shoe shiner who had previously worked on his shoes when he was white. After Sterling was explained what John was doing he comforted him "He promised perfect discretion and enthusiastically began coaching me;" (Griffin, 1996: 23). As a member of the under-privileged class Sterling recognizes that the average person doesn't notice how certain small actions make others feel. He is so pleased with knowing someone wants to spread awareness he goes the extra mile to help John, because it's not just his own situation he wants to improve but the rest of his black brotherhood. Sterling now simply tells John everything he needs to change to fit in as a black man to society and takes the opportunity to explain the constant problems they have with segregation.