

John Howard Griffin:

An Inventory of His Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator	Griffin, John Howard, 1920-1980
Title	John Howard Griffin Collection
Dates:	1952-1980
Extent:	2.5 boxes (1.04 linear feet)
Abstract:	This collection contains manuscripts for <i>Black Like Me</i> , and an essay entitled "Publication Year," a significant amount of correspondence, and research materials relating to Griffin.
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-01737
Language:	English.
Access	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition	Gift and purchases, 1980-1988 (G718, R11424)
Processed by	Rebecca Altermatt and Jennifer Peters
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

John Howard Griffin, born June 16, 1920, in Dallas, Texas, was a writer, journalist, humanitarian, and social critic. Griffin was educated at the Institute de Tours, the University of Poitiers, and the Conservatory of Fontainebleau, all in France. He ultimately received a certificate in piano and composition. Griffin also spent time at the Abbey of Solesmes contemplating a religious vocation. His first work, *The Devil Rides Outside*, is an autobiographical account of his time there and personal struggles during this period of his life. With the advent of World War II, Griffin did military service from 1942-45. While in the military, he was hit on the head and suffered a concussion, which later caused him to be struck blind while walking down a street one day in France. With this sudden disability, Griffin was forced to return to the United States. He moved in with his parents in Midland, Texas, and stayed with them until his marriage in 1952. Even after marrying and moving to his own home, Griffin still used his parents' home as a base for his writing. Griffin miraculously recovered his sight in 1957 and wrote about this experience in *Scattered Shadows*.

Griffin wrote a great number of books, articles, and reviews, the most famous and controversial of which was *Black Like Me*. In this book he examined the attitudes of whites toward African-Americans in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. In order to obtain firsthand experience, Griffin dyed his skin and lived among other African-Americans for some weeks in the fall of 1959. Griffin was also an accomplished photographer and journalist, and wrote syndicated columns for the International News Service and King Features, as well as a short series on his recovery from blindness for the *Dallas Times-Herald*.

A humanitarian, Griffin received many awards in his lifetime including the Pope John XIII Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award in 1964, and the National Council of Negro Women Award in 1960. During the 1960s, Griffin also worked in communities throughout the South, trying to open a dialogue between the African-American and white communities.

Griffin was often ill in his later adult life and died of diabetes on September 9, 1980.

Scope and Contents

Two and a half document boxes of correspondence, photocopied manuscripts, and clippings comprise the John Howard Griffin Collection. Containing mainly correspondence, the collection reveals Griffin's interest in religious, social, and literary issues. The collection is arranged into three series: I. Works, nd, 3 folders; II. Correspondence, 1954-1980, 33 folders; and III. Decherd Turner Materials Relating to John Howard Griffin, 1952-1980, 3 folders. Because the collection arrived in two groups, the first a donation from then Ransom Center Director Decherd Turner, and the second a purchase from the Griffin estate, registration numbers have been added to each folder to identify the provenance of the materials.

Series I contains manuscript drafts by Griffin, all in photocopied form. Two versions of *Black Like Me* are present--the first is a near complete copy of the manuscript, which appears to have been pulled together from two or three different drafts, and the second version is abridged and highlighted by stage directions and notes for a theatrical presentation. Of note in this folder is a drawing of a set design for this presentation. The series concludes with a short draft of an essay titled "Publication Year," in which Griffin discusses his feelings about being published.

Series II, which forms the bulk of the collection, contains correspondence to and from Griffin. Although the dates range from the 1950s to 1980, the bulk of the correspondence dates from the 1960s, a period of great productivity in Griffin's life. Divided between outgoing and incoming correspondence, the files are arranged alphabetically by correspondent, and chronologically within each folder. The bulk of the outgoing correspondence is addressed to Griffin's close friend Decherd Turner, and covers both personal and literary topics. With a few exceptions, these letters are photocopies whose originals are housed in the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas (see file 3.4 for a letter from SMU sending Turner these photocopies). Subjects of note in these letters include religion, race relations (particularly after the publication of *Black Like Me*), and Griffin's 1961 meeting with Anaïs Nin. Other outgoing letters are addressed to Carl Brannin, Mrs. James A. Hiser, and Mrs. Goldie Renfro.

The incoming correspondence subseries is rich in its depth and variety, spanning Griffin's youthful days in Europe to his later years as a writer in the United States. The letters pertain largely to religion, but they also document Griffin's interest in social issues, literature, and photography. Much of this correspondence is in French. The largest compilation of correspondence in this series came from American literary historian and critic Maxwell Geismar. Over 200 chatty and sometimes gossipy letters and postcards follow Griffin and Geismar's literary friendship from 1961-1977, and include such topics as Geismar's work at *Ramparts*, new books, publishers, the literary scene of the 1960s, family and personal news, and mutual literary acquaintances.

Seventy letters from the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain are included in this subseries, as well as 96 additional letters written by his assistants, Sisters Anne de St. Jacques and Marie Pascale. Griffin considered Maritain his spiritual mentor, and the letters contain references to Maritain's ongoing works, as well as his responses to Griffin's books.

Another important correspondent of Griffin's was Nobel Peace Prize winner Father Dominique Pire, whose 68 letters were sent to Griffin between 1966-68. Pire and Griffin worked together through the University of Peace in Huy, Belgium, and their collaboration included several peace programs and publications, documented in this correspondence.

Other correspondents include Berenice Abbott, the famed American photographer; Anne Fremantle, who was interested in writing about Griffin; Jonathan Kozol, a young social and educational critic who looked to Griffin as a kind of mentor; composer Arthur Lourie, whose correspondence dates from Lourie's stay in Princeton, N.J., and who calls Griffin "mon seul vrai ami dans ce pays" (my only true friend in this country); Francis Poulenc, who wrote to Griffin as he worked on his religious opera, *Dialogue of the Carmelites*; and Father Gerald Vann, a Dominican theologian who was instrumental in

Griffin's conversion to Roman Catholicism.

Within Series III are three folders of materials collected by Decherd Turner pertaining to John Howard Griffin. Two folders of incoming and outgoing correspondence with Turner document his activities on behalf of Griffin, and particularly Turner's association with *The John Howard Griffin Reader*. No correspondence with Griffin is present in this series. A third folder contains newspaper clippings about Griffin, documenting the publication of his first book, the restoration of his sight, and the reaction of his hometown to the publication of *Black Like Me*.

Related Material

Additional Griffin materials in the Ransom Center are found in the collections of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., *Harpers* magazine, J. Frank Dobie, H. Stiehl and John Beecher. Collections in other repositories known to contain correspondence with John Howard Griffin include the Andrew Dasburg and Grace Mott Johnson Papers at the Smithsonian Institution; the Coleman Dowell Papers at New York University; the P. D. East Papers in Boston University Library; the Paula Eliasoph Papers at the Smithsonian Institution; the Maxwell David Geismar Papers in Boston University Library; the Jargon Society Collection at SUNY Buffalo; the Kathryn Hulme Papers at Yale University Library; and the Thomas Merton Papers at Columbia University.

Separated Material

Sound recordings were transferred to the Ransom Center's Sound Recording collection and are described individually in a list at the end of this finding aid and in a [searchable database](#).

Index Terms

Correspondents

- Abbott, Berenice, 1898- .
- Fremantle, Anne Jackson, 1909- .
- Geismar, Maxwell David, 1909- .
- Kozol, Jonathan.
- Lourie, Arthur, 1892-1966.
- Maritain, Jacques, 1882-1973.

Poulenc, Francis, 1899-1963.

Reverdy, Pierre, 1889-1960.

Turner, Decherd.

Vann, Gerald, 1906-1963.

Subjects

Afro-Americans--Southern states.

Authors, American--20th century.

Racism.

Southern states--Race relations.

Places

Texas--Biography.

Document Types

Bibliographies.

Series I. Works, nd

Black Like Me, photocopy typescript with corrections, pp.7-103, nd

box 1
folder 1

Black Like Me, photocopy typescript with holograph stage directions and set design, nd

folder
2

Publication Year, photocopy typescript, nd

folder
3

Series II. Correspondence, 1954-80

Outgoing

Brannin, Carl, 1977	box 1 folder 4
Turner, Decherd	
1956-69	box 1 folder 5
1960-61	folder 6
1962-77	folder 7
Various, 1953-77	folder 8
Hiser, James A., Mrs.	
Renfro, [Goldie]	

Incoming

Abbott, Berenice, 1965-66	box 1 folder 9
Fremantle, Anne, 1965-66	folder 10
Geismar, Maxwell	
1961-62	box 1 folder 11
1963-65	folder 12
1966	folder 13
1967	folder 14
1968	folder 15
1969	folder 16
1970-72	box 2 folder 1
1973-75	folder 2
1976-77	folder 3
Kozol, Jonathan, 1975-80	folder 4

Lourie, Arthur, 1962-65	folder 5
Maritain, Jacques	
1959-62	box 2 folder 6
1963-65	folder 7
1966-67	folder 8
1968-72	folder 9
Pascale, Sister Marie	
1966-67	box 2 folder 10
1968-69	folder 11
1970-75	folder 12
Pire, Father Dominique, 1964-68	folder 13
Poulenc, Francis, 1954	folder 14
Reverdy, Pierre, 1947-1950	folder 15
St. Jacques, Sister Anne de, 1965-66	box 3 folder 1
Vann, Father Gerald, nd	folder 2

Series III. Decherd Turner Materials Relating to John Howard Griffin, 1952-1980

Outgoing correspondence, 1956-68

box 3 folder 9

Incoming correspondence, 1960-80

**folder
10**

Clippings, 1952-60

folder 11

John Howard Griffin Collection--Index of Correspondents

- Abbott, Berenice, 1898- --1.9
- Bonazzi, Robert--3.4
- Brannin, Carl--1.4
- *Catholic digest*--3.3 -4
- *Catholic messenger* (Davenport, Iowa)--3.3
- *Critic* (Chicago, Ill.)--3.3
- Daniel, Bradford--3.3
- DeGolyer Library--3.4
- Fremantle, Anne Jackson, 1909- --1.10
- Geismar, Maxwell David, 1909- --1.11-16, 2.1-3
- Griffin, Pi--3.3
- Hiser, James A., Mrs.--1.8
- Houghton Mifflin Company--3.4
- *Interracial review* (St. Louis, Mo.)--3.3
- *Jubilee*--3.3
- Kozol, Jonathan--2.4
- Lourie, Arthur, 1892-1966--2.5
- McKinley, Goldie--3.4; see also Renfro, Goldie
- Maritain, Jacques, 1882-1973--2.6-9
- New American Library--3.4
- Olafson, Cliff--3.4
- Pascale, Marie--2.10-12
- Pire, Dominique, 1910-1969--2.13
- Poulenc, Francis, 1899-1963--2.14
- *Ramparts*--3.3
- Renzo, [Goldie]--1.8, 3.4; see also McKinley, Goldie
- Reverdy, Pierre, 1889-1960--2.15
- Saint Jacques, Anne de--3.1
- *Sign* (Union City, N.J.)--3.3
- *Southwest review*--3.3
- *The Texas observer*--3.4
- Turner, Decherd--1.5-7, 3.3
- Vann, Gerald, 1906-1963--3.2
- William Collins Sons and Co.--3.4
- Williams, Annie Laurie--3.4

Sound Recordings List

- R 2254 : reel-to-reel audiotapes : John Howard Griffin Lecture
- R 2255 : reel-to-reel audiotapes : Songs for the Civil Rights Unit
- R 2256 : reel-to-reel audiotapes : Up Tight and Without Hope in 68