

# *Black Like We Imagine Ourselves: Spectacular Fantasies of Race and Nation*

- This project constructs a genealogy of white liberals who temporarily “became” black under the alibi of racial empathy. Like journalist Grace Halsell (pictured), these individuals performed experiments in race and passing intermittently from 1948-2006. Ultimately, their experiments revealed assumptions and anxieties about blackness.
- These overlooked figures of the civil rights movement index both the promises and limits of cross-racial empathy.
- As much about place as race, this project is thematically framed by my coining and defining of two key ideas: “Dixie terror” and “cartographies of empathy.”
- For example, many of these racial impostors insisted that racism was uniquely and peculiarly Southern. In short, “Dixie terror” names an *imagined* construction of exclusively Southern racism that must be anticipated to validate their temporary blackness.
- *Black Like We Imagine Ourselves* is composed of an introduction, four chapters, and an epilogue. It is an interdisciplinary project that considers the memoirs of Ray Sprigle, Grace Halsell, and John Howard Griffin, the fiction of Toni Morrison, reality television, and advertising.



*“If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?”*

---John F. Kennedy

Civil Rights Announcement, 1963

**Alisha Gaines**

Department of English  
amgaines@fsu.edu