

Arte Público Press

Teacher's Guide

Black Cuban, Black American. A Memoir by Evelio Grillo

Book Synopsis

Black Cuban, Black American, the memoir of Evelio Grillo, traces his life from the Cuban ghetto of Ybor City in Tampa, Florida, through his days in an all-black unit in the China-Burma-India theater of operations during World War II. Grillo elaborates his coming of age as a poor Black Cuban immigrant, his path to accomplishment in school and as a community organizer, and his acceptance of his multiple identities as an American.

Teaching Overview

Intended Audience and Disciplinary Connections

This guide is intended to facilitate the exploration of Latino/Hispanic/African American contributions to U.S. culture among high school and junior (as well as lower division) college students in history, social studies, and civics classes. It is also intended to educate general adult readers interested in issues of civil rights, racial equality, and community empowerment.

Important Curricular Themes

Black Cuban, Black American is a valuable tool to strengthen student comprehension and understanding of several important issues and concepts, including:

- How a community of mutual support grew out of institutionalized racism to assist members of the Black community
- The reasons why, despite all efforts toward excellence and assimilation to American values, race circumscribed the experience of African Americans, Hispanics and other immigrants of color
- The ways in which diverse people are challenged to transcend stereotypes and racism in order to live a rich and successful life in America

Reading Comprehension Strategies

Before Reading: *Initiate in-class discussions with students on important topics that underscore the social and historical relevance of the work. Sample topics include:*

- The historical barriers to education and healthcare access in the African-American and Latino communities
- The intersections of race, class, and ethnicity in American life
- The marginalization of Catholics and Catholicism in the South
- The Crash and Depression and how they affected the African-American, Latino, and immigrant communities

- The Great Migration of rural Blacks seeking improved economic prospects and an escape from segregation in the South
- Racism/Segregation in the Armed Forces during WWII and the contradictions inherent in fighting for freedom and liberty abroad in the context of racism and segregation at home

Many of the media and literary tools listed in this teaching guide can be readily incorporated into pre-reading activities.

As Reading Progresses: *Pose key questions from each chapter that focus on comprehension. Sample questions include:*

Introduction

- What were the particular experiences of Cuban immigrants in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century?
- How did this experience differ depending on the immigrants' class or race background?

Chapter 1: Father

What event does Grillo see as the starting point of his life and why? How old was he?

Chapter 2: Black Cubans and White Cubans and

Chapter 3: Black Cubans and Black Americans

- Why was Grillo's ethnicity as a Cuban and as a Black Cuban so important?
- How did his economic background relate to race in this context?

Chapter 4: Mother and

Chapter 5: Seventh Avenue

- Who was Grillo's mother? How did her qualities—both good and bad—influence his life and future?
- What did Grillo and the working-class Black Cuban community do for recreation?

Chapter 6: *Noche Buena*: The Good Night

- How does Grillo use the Christmas dinner as a metaphor to describe his childhood and early experiences?
- How was his Christmas dinner similar to or different from Christmas celebrations among other Cubans in Ybor city?

Chapter 7: Tally Wop

- What were Grillo's early experiences in school?
- In what ways did parochial school differ from public school? What did Grillo value about the experience? In what ways did he feel that this education was inadequate?

Chapter 8: Fallen to Pieces

- How did the Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Depression affect the Grillo family? How was this experience similar to that of their neighbors?
- How did other family events also affect Grillo's life?

Chapter 9: Going Up North

- Grillo “went up north” to get an education. In what way did his experiences coincide with that of other southern Blacks who were part of the Great Migration?
- How did Grillo’s experience and his opportunities for education differ from those of his sister?

Chapter 10: Washington, D.C.

- How were segregation and/or racism in Washington, D.C. different from Tampa?
- What was Grillo’s experience of the Depression?

Chapter 11: Dunbar High

- What was Grillo’s experience at Dunbar High School?
- What were the ways in which Dunbar strove to meet the particular needs of Black students?

Chapter 12: The Thurmans

- Who were the Thurmans and what pivotal role did they play in Grillo’s life?
- How did they influence his vision of the world and his future prospects?

Chapter 13: Xavier University

- What was Grillo’s experience returning to the South?
- What were his experiences in college? What did he learn there academically, as well as personally?
- In what ways did he move beyond his university experiences?

Chapter 14: Shoving Off

- What were Grillo’s first experiences in the U.S. Army?
- How did he try to address the inequities he found there?

Chapter 15: On to India and**Chapter 16: The Ledo Road**

- What was Grillo’s experience in India? How did he relate this to his own experience as a Black American?
- How did American racism carry over to the policies and practices of the U.S. Army?
- What did Grillo mean when he said, “Black soldiers have no such individual choices” (p. 116) and what were the implications of this statement?

Chapter 17: Give Me Some Men and**Chapter 18: Almost**

- How and why did the Chaplain Captain Robert Penn’s arrival affect the men so deeply?
- Describe the bonds Grillo forms with other soldiers during the war. How were they cemented by their common experience?
- How does Grillo become a leader among African-American enlisted men?

Epilogue

- How did Grillo become an activist and why? What previous lessons learned and experiences informed his work?
- How did Grillo finally reconcile his ethnic identity with that of the African-American?

Writing/Composition Ideas

- In what ways was Grillo supported, prodded, and encouraged to succeed? In what ways were these support mechanisms different from those in the white or non-immigrant communities? In what ways were they similar?
- Investigate the structures of segregation in the US Armed Forces during World War II. Were there instances of integration? How and when were the armed forces officially integrated?
- On the basis of your own personal experience, describe the ways that ethnic identity has played a role in your development. Do you experience a conflict between maintaining your ethnic identity and being an American?
- How was being Cuban as well as Black an advantage in the South in the early twentieth-century? How was it a disadvantage?
- Investigate the history of what came to be known as the Jim Crow laws. How were they justified? What was their origin and purpose? When were they outlawed?

Word and Terms Study

- *Caste*: A social class separated from others by distinctions of hereditary rank, profession, or wealth.
- “*de-Negrofication*”: Black social and psychological integration.
- *Jim Crow*: The systematic practice of discriminating against and suppressing Black people.
- *Mason-Dixon Line*: Boundary between Pennsylvania, Maryland, and West Virginia. Before the Civil War it was popularly designated as the boundary between the “slave states” and the “free states.”
- “*passing*” (as white): Having sufficient Caucasian skin tone and features to be considered White.
- *Uncle Tom*: A Black person who is regarded as being humiliatingly subservient or deferential to white people. [After Uncle Tom, a character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe.]

Word Study Note: Given that many of these words possess deep and complex meanings, encourage students to conduct more in-depth analysis of these terms through paper and on-line dictionary and encyclopedia sources. This may also serve to enhance student reading comprehension.

Key Figures in the Civil Rights Movement

- *Mary McCloud Bethune*: 1875–1955, African-American educator who founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls (later Bethune-Cookman College) and the National Council of Negro Women. She was special adviser on minority affairs to Franklin D. Roosevelt.

- *Ralphe Bunche*: 1904–71, U.S. diplomat and the first African American to be a division head in the U.S. Department of State. He served at the U.N. as undersecretary general for special political affairs and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
- *César Chávez*: 1927-1993, American agricultural labor leader who successfully organized farm workers in California and launched nationwide boycotts against leading growers. In 1972, the United Farm Workers (UFW), with Chávez as president, became a member of the AFL-CIO.
- *Frederick Douglass*: c.1817–1895, American abolitionist who escaped slavery, published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and established and edited the *North Star*, an abolitionist newspaper advocating political activism (Rochester, NY).
- *Paul Laurence Dunbar*: 1872–1906, African-American author and poet who incorporated African-American folk materials and dialects. Dunbar also wrote of African-American life in the South in novels and stories.
- *Sojourner Truth*: 1797-1883, American abolitionist and feminist. Born into slavery, she was freed in 1827 and became a leading preacher against slavery and for the rights of women.
- *Nat Turner*: 1800–1831, African-American slave and revolutionary who commanded some 60 followers in a revolt that killed 55 whites and was the most serious uprising in the history of U.S. slavery, virtually ending the organized abolition movement in the South.
- *Booker T. Washington*: 1856-1915, African-American educator chosen to organize a school for African Americans at Tuskegee, AL, which became one of the leading African-American educational institutions, emphasizing industrial training as a means of self-respect and economic independence.

About the Author

Born in Tampa, Florida, in 1919, Evelio Grillo lived until he was fifteen in Ybor City, the Latin settlement within the city. He attended Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. and Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana. He enlisted in the Army in 1940 and served for four years in India. After the war he studied Latin American History at Columbia University until 1949. He left to become director of the Alexander Community Center in the City of Oakland, California. He received a Master of Social Welfare degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1953. He later worked with a variety of civic and community service organizations, and for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Carter administration.

Related Media/Literary Tools

Audio-Visual:

Painter Jacob Lawrence, *Immigration Series*.

El Super. 1989. VHS. Videocassette. New York, N.Y.: New Yorker Video, 1989.

Books:

Alvarez-Borland, Isabel. *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona*. Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1998.

- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Blackfolk*. New York: Modern Library, 1996.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *Colored people: A Memoir*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984.
- Mormino, Gary R. and George E. Pozetta. *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors*. Gainseville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- Rodriguez, Clara E. *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census, and the History of Ethnicity in the United States*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Acknowledgements

Black Cuban, Black American and this companion teaching guide are published by Arte Público Press, the largest and most established publisher of Hispanic literature in the United States, with support from the Kauffman, Mott, and Rockefeller Foundations.