

Blue Like Me

by **Erin Aubry Kaplan**

Illustration by **J. Michael Walker**

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OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	* Ages 16+ * Grades 11+
Genre/s	* Essay * Black history
Length	7,714 words
Content Advisories	* Discussion of depression * Discussion of racism in America
One Sentence Summary	In this powerful essay, journalist Erin Aubry Kaplan explores the origins of her depression and its connection to the long history of racism in America and issues of Black identity.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Topics * Depression * Race and racism * Identity * Culture * Societal norms * Seeking help from others * Personal reflection * Mid-life crises

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<p>Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Allowing oneself to be vulnerable * Struggling with identity * Struggling to find a sense of belonging * Understanding oneself more deeply * The impact of our history and culture on our psyche * Questioning societal norms * The assumptions we make about others are often incorrect * How people appropriate other people's cultures but gut the meaning of said culture in the process * How people can be both highly talked about and invisible as individuals
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Slavery in America * Contemporary racism and segregation in America * The Civil Rights Movement
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * <i>Black Rage</i> by William Grier and Price Cobbs * <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> by Zora Neale Hurston
Author and Artists Information	<p>Erin Aubry Kaplan is a journalist, essayist, and author living in Los Angeles, CA.</p> <p>J. Michael Walker is the founding Locavore Lit LA artist. He has been an exhibiting artist since 1984 and has participated in more than 100 exhibitions.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.E CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6</p>

Author Biography

Erin Aubry Kaplan is a weekly op-ed columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, the first African American in the paper's history to hold the position. Kaplan first appeared in a monthly independent newsmagazine called *Accent L.A.*, a small publication dedicated to a large mission of providing thoughtful, literate, alternative coverage of Black Los Angeles. Kaplan was an original staff writer for *New Times Los Angeles* in 1996, and moved to the staff of the *LA Weekly* later that year. At the *Weekly* she indulged her interest in race matters and a host of other issues—some related to race, some not—with essays and features on culture, politics, the arts and the many smaller, but no less significant concerns therein. She began writing a column for the *Weekly* in 2000 called “Cakewalk,” a forum that showcases her not only as a journalist but as an author and observer of varying scales who speaks as passionately about the history of affirmative action as she does about beauty trends and initial forays into psychotherapy. Kaplan was a 2001 recipient of PEN Center West's award for literary journalism for the cover essay, “Blue Like Me,” a rumination on the connections between ancient American race struggles and modern-day depression. She was Columnist of the Year in 2002. Kaplan has been widely anthologized in books such as *Body Outlaws* (Seal Press); the *Salon* magazine essay collection “Mothers Who Think: Tales of Real-Life Parenthood” (Villiard); *Step Into A World*, a compendium of journalism and nonfiction by new Black writers (John Wiley & Sons); *Geography of Rage* (Really Great Books), an essay collection reflecting on the April 1992 civil unrest and its long-term effects in South Central Los Angeles and elsewhere; and *Rise Up Singing*, (Doubleday), a collection of essays by black women writing on motherhood whose contributors include Maya Angelou, Marian Wright Edelman, June Jordan and Alice Walker, among others. The collection won an American Book Award in 2005. Kaplan's articles have appeared in many publications, including the *London Independent*, the *Guardian*, *Salon* (salon.com), *The Crisis*, *Newsday*, *Contemporary Art Magazine*, the *Utne Reader* and *Black Enterprise*. Kaplan was born and raised in Los Angeles. She holds a B.A. in English and M.F.A. in Theater Arts from UCLA.

Artist Biography

Michael Walker is the founding Locavore Lit LA artist. He has been an exhibiting artist since 1984 and has participated in more than 100 exhibitions, received a dozen grants, fellowships, and residencies, and enjoyed solo shows at the following institutions: the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard; el Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, Mexico City; the National Museum of Catholic Art and History, East Harlem, New York City; and the Arkansas Arts Center, among others. As a writer, J. Michael is the author and illustrator of *All the Saints of the City of the Angels: Seeking the Soul of L.A. on Its Streets* (Heyday 2008), which was awarded the Eric Hoffer Award for Art Book of the Year and the Independent Publishers Association Award for Best Regional Non-Fiction on the Pacific-West, and is co-editor of *Waiting for Foreign: L.A. Writers on (and in) Guadalajara* (Peregrino Press 2010).

SYNOPSIS

Los Angeles journalist Erin Aubry explores what it means to experience a crisis of identity as a black woman in America. As she peels back her layers of depression and internal conflict, she also explores black history and writings about black identity to question whether it is possible or even desirable to separate her heritage from other aspects of her identity. She seeks to discover the root of her unhappiness and finds it is much more complex and deep seated in our culture and society than she at first suspected. This is a powerful and complex essay that challenges students to ask questions about their own abilities to express themselves and their emotions while recognizing that our heritage has ongoing relevance in our lives.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

What is depression? Break into groups of 3-4 students and research clinical descriptions of depression as well as discussions about the origins of depression, how it is treated, and common myths and misconceptions about depression.

Come back together as a class and ask each group to share their findings. Then discuss whether students think people sometimes have a hard time to admitting to being depressed and why they think this is.

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from “Blue Like Me”:

“The usual miasma was there, but surging beneath it, like oil stealthily darkening a floor where you thought only water had spilled, was a sense of brokenness that felt vast and familiar, live in; it had the wonderful and terrible assurance of a thing that had long been alive, much longer than myself.”

After looking up the term “miasma,” write a journal entry speculating how someone might experience a mental sense of miasma and what factors in our lives: personal, societal, and historical, might contribute to a feeling of miasma on more than one level.

Universal Themes

Hold a class debate on the degree to which our histories shape our personal identities today. Ask students to choose extreme sides of this argument – no effect or a heavy effect and choose historic events with broad social impact as the starting point for the debate.

Each team should conduct research and prepare their points and choose lead debaters.

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
virtual	legacy	progenitors
characterizing	colossally	conciliator
angst	ludicrous	iconography
cusp	zenith	impresarios
discourse	germane	baby boomers
confers	brethren	social evolution
inertia	birthright	color line (or color-line)
integration	despondency	existential crisis
ominous	auspices	voting bloc
preposterous	resonant	gadflies
cornerstone	acquiescence	legally sanctioned
concurrence	embryonic	plantation
extinct	quandry	Ground Zero
insight	epithet	Enlightenment
disassembled	extant	the establishment
consign	reparations	Southern-patois
dysfunction	wrought	lingua franca
elaborate	annihilation	exigencies
adamant	caustic	syncopation
natal	conundrum	sociopolitical

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
narcissism	liberation	corporate tiger
chronic	Bourgeois	gestalt
omission	surmount	political malcontent
incrimination	reticence	Mother confessor
forgo	hapless	chimerical

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. Explore the concept of self-actualization. How, where, when, and from whom did the term originate? What is needed to achieve this state? Is it possible for some people to have fewer opportunities to achieve self-actualization than others? Must one have a certain level of wealth, security, and social status in order to achieve this state or is it available to everyone?

Write a report analyzing the concept and critically evaluating who this state may or may not be available to and the institutional reasons for this.

2. What is the “color line” that Kaplan discusses in “Blue Like Me”? Research the origin and history of this term and how it appears in contemporary journalism and write a 2-3 page essay discussing it and whether you think this term is relevant today.
3. Comb Kaplan’s essay for terms that refer to exploring individual identity. After listing and defining these terms, reflect in your journal for 10-15 minutes about whether you agree with Kaplan that some people have greater social and cultural permission to have and explore individual identity than others.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Do you believe you have to be strong in the face of adversity? To suck it up, so to speak? Is it okay to show weakness or vulnerability? Why or why not? What are the upsides and downsides to showing weakness? To not showing weakness?
2. What is the overall point that Kaplan is making in her essay? What is she telling us by taking us on her personal journey of therapy, reflection, and investigation? What did she learn that she hopes we will learn too?
3. Why is America’s history with slavery still important today? How is it that something that ended over 100 years ago can still influence our culture and society?

4. Why do people say America has a culture of individualism? What does this mean? Is it healthy, unhealthy, or a combination of the two? What does Kaplan mean when she says some people have access to this culture and others do not?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. Erin Aubry Kaplan is a journalist. In what ways does she approach her essay as a journalist? Chart her interviews with experts and discuss how these reflect the skills and ethos of journalism. Also, which interview did you find most interesting and why?
2. Why do you think Kaplan chose to label the sections of her essay like chapters? Choose your favorite section and discuss what you found most interesting about it, what themes were prevalent, what facts and examples were used by Kaplan to illustrate her point in the section, and how it relates to the overall essay.
3. What does Kaplan have to say about black suicide rates in “Blue Like Me”? Why are these statistics important and relevant to the essay? Discuss these questions and then research current statistics on black suicide rates. Are they the same or different? Explain your findings and be sure to cite your sources of information.
4. How is the title of the essay, “Blue Like Me,” a metaphor for both Kaplan’s mental state and her observations about the connections between depression and being black in America?
5. What assumptions does Kaplan make about her therapist and why? Are they accurate? Why do you think Kaplan chooses to end her essay with her therapist’s confession?
6. Discuss the illustrator’s choice of imagery for his art for “Blue Like Me.” Why is the woman dressed in a period costume instead of modern dress? How is this relevant to Kaplan’s discussion of the influence of the past on her present state of mind?

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

Kaplan begins and ends her essay purposefully with a set of carefully chosen quotes. Her essay is also thematically split into sections and simultaneously follows her personal journey, her reflections and research on black history, racism, culture, and society.

On a smaller scale of 5-7 pages, write an exploration of your identity that is about more than just you — link your work to the greater historic, cultural, and social context in which you exist. Choose beginning and end quotes for your work, and structure it into sections thematically like Kaplan.

Descriptive

Write a description of a time you experienced a powerful realization – about anything! In one to two pages, make that realization come alive in vivid detail. Share your realization with your class.

Analysis

In “Blue Like Me,” Kaplan argues that it is important to not try to separate herself from her identity as a Black woman. She indicates that others disagree with her on this choice. Pulling examples from both Kaplan’s essay and your own research on the intricacies of human identity, analyze and discuss Kaplan’s reasons for her viewpoint as well as why some disagree with her, and who you believe makes the stronger arguments.

Complementary Reading Text Option

Read the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston.

Writing Exercise

In a short essay of 4-5 pages, discuss the topics of identity, black history in America, and how “the personal is political” in the context of both Kaplan’s experiences and observations as related in her essay and the characters in Hurston’s novel. How does each author tackle notions of not just what it means to be black in America, but what it means to be a black woman in America?

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

Using images cut from magazines and newspapers or that are printed from the web or hand drawn, ask students to create identity collages that illustrate their thoughts on who they are both as individuals and as each part of a social and cultural heritage.

Ask students to type a paragraph discussing the meaning of their collage and to post this next to their collage in the classroom.

Encourage students to choose images that are symbolic representations of the concepts they want to communicate. Students should present their work to their fellow classmates.

Classroom Activity Two

Kaplan mentions many authors, experts, and other contemporary and historic figures in her essay. Make a list of these individuals (also listed in the vocabulary chart) and assign students to research and create bios with pictures of each person.

Post the completed bios and pictures in the classroom and ask the students to present what they learned.

Home Activity

Interview a friend or family member about how they see their racial and cultural heritage affect their personal identity. Ask them to describe the positive, negative, and neutral aspects of their heritage in their eyes. Write a report discussing what you learned.

Guest Speaker

Option One: Ask the author and / or artist to visit your classroom and speak.

Option Two: Invite one of the authors of *Black Rage* (who both live in California) to come and speak about their work and about issues of race and identity.

Field Trip

Partner with a philosophy professor at a local university to take a trip to the university and sit in as a class on one of the professor's lectures.

The point of this trip is to be an exercise in making time for deeper thought and reflection.

Afterwards, ask students to reflect in writing on what they learned.

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Writing Exercise

Pick a subsection within Kaplan's "Blue Like Me," which you believe is the most important to consider in light of the current political climate in the United States. Then, write a two-page long response explaining your choice, including the title of the subsection, as well as citations from the text. Be specific about our current political climate and why it makes your chosen subsection so important.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.A: Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11-12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4.C: Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, its etymology, or its standard usage.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5: Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6: Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A: Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A: Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.C: Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.E: Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A: Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.