

DARK PASSAGE: BIOENHANCEMENT AND BOREDOM¹

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ONE OF MY FAVORITE PASSAGES IN WALKER PERCY'S 1966 novel, *The Last Gentleman*, begins when Will Barrett, a young Southerner temporarily exiled in the North, is hitchhiking south from New York. Sitting patiently on the side of the road for an hour and a half, Barrett is almost ready to give up when a bottle-green Chevrolet pulls over. The driver is a well-dressed Negro in a brown suit. Barrett takes him for a preacher, or possibly a teacher. His name is Isham Washington. A bit of good fortune, thinks Barrett: this is the sort of colored man who will converse on all manner of high-minded subjects. Barrett stows his gear in the back seat and climbs in.

¹ This work was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. My thanks to the members of the Enhancement Technologies Project for their comments on a talk based on this paper.

But there is something odd about the man. Barrett can't quite put his finger on it. This man talks about Einstein. He carries on about air-conditioning, and landscaping, and how they upset the balance of nature. "There is the cause of your violence!" he all but shouts. This is not the way an educated colored man talks, thinks Barrett. An educated colored man does not cry "Capital!" and "Marvelous!" in a nervous, reedy voice.

As they drive, the man leans over to Barrett and says, "I have a little confession to make to you." "Certainly," Barrett replies. The colored man continues. "I am not what you think I am." He pushes up his coat sleeve and shows Barrett a light patch of skin on his arm. He is not really a Negro, he tells Barrett. Nor is his name Isham Washington. His real name is Forney Aiken, and he is a photojournalist on an investigative trip to the South—"below the cotton curtain," as Aiken explains it. He is doing a journalistic series on the "behind-the-scenes life of the Negro." And what better way to do such a series than to become a Negro himself? Aiken tells Barrett that he persuaded a dermatologist friend up North to administer an alkaloid to turn his skin dark, and that it can be reversed with a skin-lightening cream. He then acquired the personal papers of a black man called Isham Washington, an agent for a burial insurance firm in Pittsburgh. Aiken has just begun his journey south in disguise, and Barrett is his first test. Aiken has a hidden camera in his necktie.²

Americans who came of age in the 1960s and '70s will recognize Aiken as a fictional stand-in for John Howard Griffin, the best-selling author of *Black Like Me*.³ Griffin was a novelist and journalist who, like Aiken, underwent dermatological treatment to darken his skin in 1959, and then spent six weeks disguised as a black man in the deep South. His account of his experiences was serialized in the magazine *Sepia*, then published in book form in 1961. *Black Like Me* turned Griffin into a

² Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* (1965; London: Panther Books, 1985) 110-12.

³ John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (1961; New York: Signet, 1996).

minor celebrity and a spokesman on Civil Rights. Many white Americans found themselves deeply moved by Griffin's account of the racial prejudice he experienced as a black man. But others vilified him. In his hometown, Griffin was hung in effigy.

Black Like Me has had a curious legacy. On one level it was hugely successful. It became an international bestseller and a standard text in many school classrooms. Once a minor novelist, Griffin became a well-known media figure. Even today, *Black Like Me* is included on the syllabus of many African-American Studies courses. For white Americans in particular, Griffin's experiment seems to have an enduring appeal. In 1964, *Black Like Me* was turned into a Hollywood movie with James Whitmore. Four years later Grace Halsell, a White House aide in the Johnson administration, repeated Griffin's experiment, living as a black woman in the South and in Harlem. She published a book about her experience called *Soul Sister*.⁴ As recently as 1994, Joshua Solomon, a student at the University of Maryland, undertook his own Griffin-inspired experiment and wrote about it for *The Washington Post*.⁵

Yet there has always been an undercurrent of discomfort with Griffin's experiment. Many black readers were uneasy with the preposterous idea that it took a white man's testimony to verify racial prejudice in the South, and as the 1960s came to a close, Griffin found himself marginalized within the Civil Rights movement—a development he admits with bitterness in his later writings, yet never quite seems able to understand. Griffin also became an easy mark for satire. In *The Last Gentleman*, Percy turns him into a clownish Yankee who hangs out with Hollywood actors intent on staging a "morality play" in Alabama. Percy refers to him as "the Pseudo-Negro."

What accounts for the lasting appeal of Griffin's experiment? At least part of it, I suspect, comes from the actual intervention itself—the con-

⁴ Grace Halsell, *Soul Sister* (New York: World, 1969).

⁵ Joshua Solomon, "Skin Deep: Reliving *Black Like Me*: My Own Journey into the Heart of Race-Conscious America," *The Washington Post* (30 October 1994).

crete, physical act of darkening your skin. This is not posturing, or at least not in any simple way; nor is it merely an act of imagination: the body actually changes color. And what American cannot identify with the existential thrill of taking on the identity of another person, of becoming a stranger in your own body? But it is this very exercise in body-snatching that makes many of us cringe involuntarily at the thought of what Griffin did. However good his intentions, Griffin was never really black. Self-transformation has its dangers, and one is the danger of fakery, to yourself as well as to others. This is part of what Percy is hinting at with the figure of Forney Aiken, who is less an investigative journalist than a voyeuristic thrill-seeker. One danger of the way we live now lies not just in the way that our selves are packaged and given to us by others, but in the promise of liberation through self-transformation. These days, self-transformation is part of the package too.

Bioenhancement and Body-Snatching

I decided to go back and read *Black Like Me* several years ago when I began a project on “enhancement technologies.” In bioethics, the term enhancement technologies has become short-hand for all manner of pharmaceuticals and surgical procedures used not just for curing illness or disability, but also for improving human capacities and characteristics: cosmetic surgery, botox injections, Prozac, Paxil, Rogaine, Viagra—any intervention that is used for biological or psychological enhancement but which needs to be provided by a doctor.

American medicine has typically taken a laissez-faire, market-driven approach to these interventions. If people want them and they are not harmful, then doctors have not generally hesitated to provide them. But one broader worry about many of these interventions is the way they have played into racist ideals of beauty. The demand for many kinds of cosmetic surgery has long been tied to a desire to efface ethnicity—to get rid of the so-called “Jewish” nose, for example, or “Asian” eyes. The cosmetics industry itself has a long history of selling skin-lighteners and hair straighteners to African-Americans. The black novelist and journalist Charles Schuyler satirized the industry in his 1931 novel *Black No More*, which described the development of a medical

intervention that would turn black people into whites.⁶ Margaret Olivia Little calls this kind of intervention “cultural complicity.”⁷ By undergoing a procedure to change or efface your ethnicity, you may be reinforcing the suspect norms that led to your desire for the procedure in the first place.

Black Like Me turns all these concerns on their heads. It describes not a skin-lightener, but a skin-darkener, undertaken not for a black man to pass as white, but for a white man to pass as black. What should a right-thinking, race-conscious liberal make of *this* kind of medical intervention? Griffin claimed to be undergoing the procedure in order to investigate racism in the South, which is surely a worthy goal, but in fact, by 1959 nobody really had any doubts that racism existed in the South. Besides, why should it take a white man to tell people what it is like to be black? Plenty of black writers were able to do that, and do it much better than Griffin could. Whatever the reason for the popularity of *Black Like Me*, it seems to go beyond the ordinary appetite for investigative journalism.

In some ways, reading *Black Like Me* is like reading the memoir of a spy, or a plain-clothes detective. As you, the reader, accompany Griffin on his journey in disguise, it is as if you travel with him into another world, where his (and thus your) identity is hidden from sight. The effect is like watching Jimmy Stewart look through his binoculars in *Rear Window*, or reading about Huck going ashore at Goshen dressed as a girl: you can see but you cannot be seen, or at least seen for what you really are. I suspect that even a black Southern reader might get this vicarious thrill, and might even have gotten it in 1961 when the book was first published. Not because a black Southern reader would need Griffin to tell him what conditions were like in the South in 1961, but because this kind of knowledge is secondary to the book's main

⁶ George Samuel Schuyler, *Black No More* (New York: Modern Library, 1999).

⁷ Margaret Olivia Little, “Cosmetic Surgery, Suspect Norms and the Ethics of Complicity,” *Enhancing Human Traits: Ethical and Social Implications*, ed. Erik Parens (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998) 162-78.

appeal, which is the appeal of hiding, of transforming your identity, of looking at things undetected.

Many enhancement technologies hold just this sort of draw. Their appeal lies in the way they transform experience. Some of them operate directly on consciousness itself. They alter the way you see the world. Ritalin allows you to concentrate your attention; Prozac makes the world look brighter and more vivid. They change the way you perceive the world and the way you act in it. Other enhancement technologies work to change the way you are perceived. Larger breasts, greater height, straighter hair, a Gentile nose: you feel different, but you feel different because of the way other people perceive you. In both cases there is a feedback loop between the way you see the world and the way the world sees you: you look and behave differently, so you are treated differently; you are treated differently, so you look and behave differently. When Joshua Solomon, John Griffin's imitator, disguised himself as black, he found himself being excessively polite to white people. He did it, he says, as a means of getting the respect that was denied him when his skin was black.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois used the term “double consciousness” to describe the experience of being black in America. By “double consciousness,” Du Bois meant the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Black folk in America always feel their two-ness, he wrote, because the way they see themselves is distorted by the way they are, in turn, seen by others. Du Bois writes that “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets himself see himself through the revelation of the other world.”⁸

⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford, 1997, originally 1903) 38.

Double consciousness can describe both the danger and the appeal of using enhancement technologies as a strategy for transforming experience. The danger comes when you buy wholeheartedly into a standard of value against which you will inevitably fail to measure up. This is exactly what Du Bois worried about: that black folks in America, by virtue of the cultural norms that shape and sustain their desires, may find themselves doomed to self-loathing or futile striving. Given a set of normative standards according to which light skin is superior to dark skin, straight hair superior to curly, and European features superior to African, black Americans will constantly seek an ideal of beauty that they will never quite reach. For example, many people, both black and white, find themselves oddly disturbed by Michael Jackson's slow morph into a white person through repeated cosmetic surgery. Not that he should not have the right to exercise his desires; the problem is his desire to change in the first place. As Cornel West writes, "Michael Jackson may rightly wish to be viewed as a person, not a color (either black or white) but his facial revisions reveal a self-measurement based on a white yardstick."⁹

Yet the appeal of these technologies (as Griffin seems to have realized, however vaguely) is to be seen as someone other than the person you are. What is it like to travel not just as another person, but another person whom others will treat very differently than they ordinarily treat you? Will you come to see yourself differently if others see you differently? You will, of course. This is a lesson familiar not just to drag queens, body-builders, and undercover cops, but to expatriates of the more conventional sort. You discover how American you are by living in Berlin, how Southern you are by living in Boston. Your accent changes, your vocabulary, your dress, your manner; you start to behave in ways that would be unrecognizable to the folks back home. (You hide your Southernness and talk like Ted Kennedy, or else you exaggerate it and talk like Strom Thurmond.) Your identity shifts depending on how you are seen by others. Sometimes, in fact, your identity shifts so much that it is no longer clear to you just who you are—which is exactly what is disturbing about Griffin's experiment.

⁹ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 96.

Travels with Griffin

For years the idea had haunted me, and that night it returned more insistently than ever. If a white man became a Negro in the Deep South, what adjustments would he have to make? What is it like to experience discrimination based on skin color, something over which one has no control?¹⁰

Griffin set out to answer these questions, which open *Black Like Me*, by changing the color of his skin. After acquiring sponsorship from the black-owned magazine *Sepia* and informing the FBI of his plans, Griffin travelled to New Orleans to see medical specialists, with the hope that medical treatment could transform him into a Negro.

His request was fulfilled by the first dermatologist he saw. The dermatologist gave him oxsoralen, a medication ordinarily used to treat vitiligo, and monitored him on high doses of the drug for the next several days. Griffin spent hours under a sun lamp, shaved his head, and stained his skin with vegetable dye. Looking at himself in the mirror four days later, he saw a stranger, “a fierce, bald, very dark Negro.” He writes:

The transformation was total and shocking. I had expected to see myself disguised, but this was something else. I was imprisoned in the flesh of an utter stranger, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship. All traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence.¹¹

Thus humbled, Griffin set out into another world to which he was a complete stranger, the segregated world of black Southerners in Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. He traveled on foot and by bus, looking unsuccessfully for work, living in segregated boarding houses and hotels and eating in segregated restaurants. His story is one of cruelty and hate stares from whites, and a good-natured kindness

¹⁰ Griffin 7.

¹¹ Griffin 15.

from blacks, with whom he found a welcome solidarity in a racist South. Griffin stayed on the road for six weeks before he returned home.

But there is something a little odd about *Black Like Me*, something that may be more apparent now than when it was published. As you, the reader, try to imagine yourself in Griffin's place, you can hardly help but ask: how is Griffin going to pull this off? It is no small thing for a white man to pass as black. It is no small thing, in fact, to impersonate anyone whose way of life is unfamiliar to you, to notice and make your own the sensibility of people of another culture. Yet Griffin appears to have been oddly confident. Initially, he is very anxious about his *physical* appearance. One black man in whom Griffin confides points out that Griffin might be given away by the white hairs on his arm, and this possibility worries Griffin a lot. But once he shaves his arm hairs and spends a few days undetected as a black man, his anxiety seems to dissipate. Even as he takes painstaking care with his physical disguise, shaving his head and dyeing his skin, he pays no attention at all to anything else—nothing about his manner, his speech, his voice, his way of carrying himself. He doesn't give any thought to the way black folks in the South talk, or what they talk about, the way they laugh or make jokes. He does not seem to know anything about their music, or churches, or really anything at all about their lives apart from the fact of racial oppression.

Yet it is not hard to see why Griffin was so preoccupied with skin color. The white South itself was obsessed with it, of course, and it was crucial to Griffin's moral purpose to show that this obsession was absurd. Griffin wanted to hammer home the point that deep down, regardless of skin color, human beings are all the same. In America we profess to judge people as individuals, he writes, not as types. Yet if this were true, then "my life as a black John Howard Griffin would not be greatly changed, since I was that same human individual, altered only in appearance."¹² His life *did* change, of course, and this is the point of the book. He was insulted, patronized, threatened, blocked from using public facilities reserved only for whites—all because his skin had been darkened. Hence his obsession with skin color. To concede that black

¹² Griffin 161.

Southerners really *are* different in significant ways other than skin color would have been to give in to the segregationists. It would have undermined the moral force of Griffin's experience.

But Griffin does not stop at convincing the reader that black and white Americans are no different from one another. He seems to have also convinced himself. The most unnerving element of Griffin's book is the way he seems genuinely to convince himself that during the time he was wearing his disguise he *actually changed races*. He constantly refers to himself as a Negro, and when he mentions white people, he refers to them unselfconsciously as "they" and "them," (rather than "we" and "us"), who live in a world utterly apart from the world that "we Negroes" inhabit. It is as if Griffin really believes he is black.

As Griffin eats a humble supper with a black family in Alabama, he writes, "I felt more profoundly than ever the totality of *my* Negro-ness, the immensity of its isolating effects."¹³ Commenting on white customers whose shoes he is shining, he writes: "All of them [whites] showed *us* how they felt about the Negro, the idea that we were people of such low morality that nothing could offend *us*."¹⁴ As he eats beans and rice in a segregated restaurant, he wonders: "The distance between them [whites] and me was far more than the miles that physically separated us. It was an area of unknowing. I wondered if it could really be bridged."¹⁵ And as he sits in the home of the Alabama family on whose floor he spent a night, thinking of his children in Texas, Griffin writes, "They slept now in clean beds in a warm house while their father, a bald-headed old Negro, sat in the swamps and wept, holding it in so that he would not awaken the Negro children."¹⁶

Of course, it might be that the experience of being treated like a black man really did transform Griffin's consciousness; that when he wrote

¹³ Griffin 109 (italics added).

¹⁴ Griffin 31 (italics added).

¹⁵ Griffin 41 (italics added).

¹⁶ Griffin 113.

these words he truly did feel like a black man, and not merely like a white man disguised as black. Some confusion is understandable. Occasionally Griffin even slips between identities, forgetting which race “we” refers to. Writing on one particularly dreadful night in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Griffin describes

the onrush of revulsion, the momentary flash of blind hatred against the whites who were somehow responsible for all this, the old bewilderment of wondering, “Why do they do it? Why do they keep us like this? What are they gaining? What evil has taken them?”

“They” in this passage means white people. Yet only a few sentences later in the very same paragraph, “they” becomes “we” and Griffin is white again: “My revulsion turned to grief that *my own people* could give the hate stare, could shrivel men’s souls, could deprive humans of rights they unhesitatingly accord their livestock.”¹⁷

But even if Griffin honestly felt like a black man while he was disguised as black in 1959, it would take no small amount of self-deception to do the same thing eighteen years later when he was writing a new epilogue to his book. There Griffin writes as if he had once been transformed into an African American, a man with genuine African ancestry born into a culture of segregation and bigotry: an authentic citizen of the country about which he was writing and not just a traveler with a six-week visa. Look, for example, at this passage, in which Griffin describes the more subtle kind of racial prejudice that pervaded Southern life:

[W]e did not see WHITE ONLY signs on the doors of libraries (where *we* could find learning and books) but *we* knew that we had better not try to enter one. We saw no WHITE ONLY signs on the doors of schools or universities, but we knew it was suicidal to try to enter one.¹⁸

¹⁷ Griffin 69.

¹⁸ Griffin 163 (italics added).

“We,” for Griffin, still refers to “we Negroes.” Thus does a white, Southern, university-educated novelist on a pilgrimage through the South speak of his oppression at the hands of people just like him. Whether this was the result of a self-conscious rhetorical style or an unconscious identification with others, Griffin seems to have forgotten that he was never really black.

Pilgrims and Strangers

To describe what Griffin did as a spiritual pilgrimage does not require much of a stretch. In fact, the metaphor of the pilgrimage as an interior, spiritual journey has become so firmly entrenched in popular consciousness that it is now a cliché, a staple of self-help literature and Disney cartoons. The metaphor has become so worn that it is sometimes easy to forget that it is, after all, still a metaphor—that a pilgrimage is, first and foremost, a journey to a real place. (A *New Yorker* cartoon has Queen Isabella saying to Columbus: “I don’t want to hear about your self-discovery. Tell me about the new continent.”) The pilgrim does not merely travel in search of another state of inner, spiritual well-being; she travels physically to Jerusalem, or Mecca, or Lourdes. For some religions, like Islam, a pilgrimage is strictly required of all believers. For others it is not required, yet may be undertaken to strengthen a believer’s spiritual faith. Pilgrimages are ancient in origin, but by no means are they dying out. Often they arise spontaneously. Where once a Christian pilgrim may have journeyed on foot to Jerusalem, now he is more likely to travel in an RV to Conyers, Georgia, where an apparition of the Virgin Mary has appeared in a cow pasture.

What ancient pilgrimages held in common was travel to a holy place, a place where miracles had happened or might happen again. The contemporary pilgrimage, in contrast, is a journey not to a holy place, a place made sacred by external frameworks of meaning, but an interior journey in search of identity. The self is what is sacred now. In America, we are told, who you are is not a matter of what external standards of meaning say you are, but rather what you make of yourself and what you discover yourself to be. The point of life is to discover, articulate, and follow the markers of your own identity, the things that make you who you are.

In Griffin's case, we see a convergence not just between spiritual and physical pilgrimages, but between the ancient pilgrimage and the contemporary. The contemporary pilgrim leaves home to discover who she really is. By leaving home you see yourself through the eyes of others. What is interesting about Griffin's journey is that it turns this trope about journeys on its head. He is traveling, but he is not really leaving home: he is a Southerner traveling through the South. He is constantly being made aware of his identity in a way that he has never had to before, but of course, it is not really *his* identity: he is in disguise. And while he does not explicitly set out to discover anything about himself—on the contrary, the whole point of his journey is to investigate the experience of the black man—he winds up discovering things about himself that make him rather uncomfortable. When he sees himself in the mirror, he is shocked not just by what stares back at him (“a fierce, bald Negro”) but by his own negative reaction to what he sees. He does not much like his reflection, and he does not much like himself for not liking it.¹⁹

If the contemporary pilgrimage sounds rather self-obsessed and inward-looking, this is exactly the point. The purpose of the contemporary pilgrimage is not to discover something about the world, but to discover something about the self. What was true in 1959 is doubly true today. To see how far we have come since Griffin made his journey, compare it to the journey of Joshua Solomon, Griffin's imitator thirty-five years later. Like Griffin, Solomon does not profess any worries about his ability to pass convincingly as a black person. But unlike Griffin, Solomon does not spend any time with black people. His only extended contacts on his journey are with white people, who are uniformly rude, patronizing, distant, or downright hostile. As an argument that racism is alive and kicking, the article makes a forceful point, but as an investigation into the experience of black people, it is oddly self-centered, like an ethnography of a foreign culture that records the feelings of the ethnographer and fails to mention the culture's inhabitants. The question it asks is not, “How does it feel to be black in America?” but “How would it feel for *me* to be

¹⁹ Gayle Wald, “A Most Disagreeable Mirror: Reflections on White Identity in *Black Like Me*,” *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine Ginsberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 151-77.

black in America?” And the subtext to that question, in turn, is “How does it differ from the way I ordinarily feel?” Here, perhaps, is the real appeal of this kind of enhancement technology: not so much a passport into another existence as a tool for self-exploration. This is part of what Walker Percy was poking fun at with the figure of Forney Aiken, who is not only a Pseudo-Negro, but also a Pseudo-Pilgrim.

Enhancement technologies are often criticized as the products of narcissism, the inevitable result of an American quest to be young, beautiful, and successful. As accurate as this criticism may sometimes be, it misses the way that enhancement technologies have become part of a larger project surrounding individual identity. The striking thing about the way contemporary Americans talk about enhancement technologies is the way they identify the technologies as a means of reaching their true selves. A body-builder justifies his choice to take anabolic steroids by saying, “I couldn’t wait three or four or five more years to become myself.”²⁰ A middle-aged woman, no longer clinically depressed, nonetheless says that without Prozac, “I am not myself.”²¹ An adult self-diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, now on stimulants, says, “I had 38 years of thinking I was a bad person. Now I’m rewriting the tapes of who I thought I was to who I really am.”²² A man undergoes sex-change surgery to become a woman, saying that all he wants is “to live as myself, to clothe myself in a more proper body, and achieve Identity at last.”²³ No matter how dramatic a change you have undergone, you can conceptualize it as a means of reaching your true self, that nugget of identity buried deep inside you. You may have bleached your hair, enlarged your breasts, removed your bald spot with Rogaine or overcome your shyness with Paxil, but you have done it all in the service of self-discovery.

²⁰ Samuel Wilson Fussell, *Muscle* (New York: Avon, 1992) 127.

²¹ Peter Kramer, *Listening to Prozac* (London: Fourth Estate, 1994) 18.

²² Claudia Wallis, “Life in Overdrive,” *Time* (18 July 1994): 43.

²³ Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987) 104.

But self-discovery is only one element of the project of identity. A more important element is self-presentation. A proper self-presentation is crucial for the project of identity, because who you are depends on how you are seen by others. Not completely, of course: many elements of identity have little to do with self-presentation (say, being a Presbyterian). But other elements of identity have everything to do with it—your gender, your personality, and your ethnicity, among other things. Often self-presentation becomes most important when you are trying to change some aspect of your identity. You can attempt to change your identity and fail precisely because others do not find your self-presentation convincing. You may try to pass as white, yet be told by others that you are black; you may want to be recognized as a body-builder, yet fail to achieve the proper look; you may want to be a woman, yet be seen by others as a man. But it is also possible, of course, for a self-presentation to succeed. Sometimes you will be seen by others in precisely the way you want to be seen, and this will legitimate your project.

The importance of self-presentation may help to explain Griffin's sense that when he dyed his skin black he really became a black man. Once identity becomes synonymous with self-presentation, the idea that you are what you pretend to be ceases to sound paradoxical. You are a woman when others recognize you as a woman. You are a Gentile when others see you as Gentile. You are an outgoing extrovert when others perceive you as extroverted, even if your extroversion comes from a pill. Once self-presentation becomes the measure of identity—once you take on the notion that who you are is how you present yourself to others—passing as black and being black become one and the same. When you pass successfully as a black man, you have really become a black man.

In the case of Forney Aiken, however, the point of the identity project is slightly different. Aiken dyes his skin black not so much to genuinely “become a Negro in the Deep South,” as Griffin did, but to set off on an adventure. He is in it for the thrill. The purpose of his disguise is not much different from the purpose of his journey through the South: to relieve his boredom by transforming his experience of the world. His brown skin and his bottle-green Chevrolet each allow him to see the world anew. And so it is for many other enhancement technologies, from cosmetic surgery to cosmetic psychopharmacology. Even chang-

ing sex, according to the transsexual historian Susan Stryker, is “a magical journey to transform the constructed realities of nature and society.” She says that people who stay the same gender all their lives are like people who never leave their hometown.²⁴

For Walker Percy, a student of Kierkegaard, the problem of contemporary life is boredom. Emptiness, alienation, and loneliness, yes; but from one day to the next the problem is boredom. Your hometown is boring. Your work is boring. Your vacations are boring. Your husband is boring. Even sex becomes boring, if you do it the right way. Kierkegaard thought that most people simply bore other people. But if you are really gifted at boredom, you even bore yourself. When your boredom reaches its zenith, Kierkegaard says, either you die of boredom, or you shoot yourself out of curiosity.²⁵ Hence the marriage of the existential and the mundane, the problem of meaning and the problem of boredom. Ask not what you should do with your life, but what you should do after lunch.

Percy believed that we Americans are bored not just because our experience of other things is packaged for us, but also because our experience of our selves is packaged. We have surrendered virtually every aspect of our lives to experts, who instruct us how to live. We learn how to live our lives by watching television, reading self-help books, listening to doctors and marriage counselors and child-care experts. We live in planned communities, engaging in planned recreational activities, taking planned vacations. We model our bodies, our hair, our clothes on the people we see on television and the movie screen. What we understand of our interior lives we learn from psychotherapists, advice columnists, call-in radio hosts, and life coaches. Our unacknowledged god is science, which promises a rational and objective way of understanding the universe and our place in it. We have signed over the title to our lives to experts, and the result, inevitably, is disap-

²⁴ Quoted in Richard M. Levine, “Crossing the Line,” *Mother Jones* 19.3 (May-June 1994): 43-48.

²⁵ Roger Poole and Henrik Stangerup, ed., *The Laughter Is on My Side: An Imaginative Introduction to Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 41.

pointment. We are disappointed because our experience of the world will never match up to what the experts have told us to expect. The reality never matches up to the packaging.

For this reason, experience is not merely there for the taking anymore; it must be *recovered*. This is what a pilgrimage promises to do. You are bored and suffocated with malaise, your life does not feel the way the experts have told you it should, yet you can recover it all by traveling. Set out for parts unknown, where the landscape looks different. You can hitchhike to New Mexico, hop a plane to Cape Town, ride a bicycle to British Columbia. (“Home may be where the heart is,” says Percy, “but it’s no place to spend a Wednesday afternoon.”)²⁶ A similar strategy is disguise. Don the persona of someone else entirely. Take on their behavior and their costume: hell-raising, Southern-boy poet; bearded Left Bank intellectual; Ivy League preppie in an L. L. Bean windbreaker. Stain your skin black and become a pseudo-Negro. Or best of all, like Griffin, do both: take to the road in disguise. You will see the world differently, and the world will see you differently too.

Whether these are anything more than temporary solutions to the malaise, of course, is a matter for debate. Certainly Percy and Kierkegaard thought not. Both travel and enhancement technologies run out eventually: you can only change yourself so often before even that becomes habit and routine. As Kierkegaard writes:

One tires of living in the country, and moves to the city; one tires of one’s native land, and travels abroad; one is europamuede, and goes to America, and so on; finally one indulges in a sentimental hope of endless journeyings from star to star.²⁷

²⁶ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Washington Square, 1983) 151.

²⁷ Poole and Stangerup, *The Laughter Is on My Side*, 44.

But for Kierkegaard this sort of exercise can go on indefinitely, and it is ultimately futile. One can only search for diversion from boredom for so long. Better to stay home like me, says Kierkegaard, and become a genius of solitary inventiveness.

In fact, if your pilgrimage is not undertaken with clear vision, it may not be a solution at all, temporary or otherwise. It may just become an exercise in self-deception. Like John Howard Griffin, you may find yourself forgetting who you really are. Because for all the plasticity of postmodern American identity, for all the talk of performance and mutability and protean selves, the self still has a history, and histories cannot be erased. You may transform your experience of the world (and hence relieve your boredom) by taking on another ethnic identity, but that does not change your past. There is still a difference between a fake and the genuine article.

For the contemporary pilgrim, as Percy realized, the problem is even more complicated than it was for Kierkegaard. Travel is not an easy solution to boredom, and this is not just because the novelty of travel runs out. It is because travel itself has been packaged so thoroughly that even the first trip is not a novelty. The Caribbean cruise, the adventure tour to Alaska, the Wanderjahr through Europe, the family trip to Disneyland or the Grand Canyon or Hilton Head: all have been so thoroughly described, photographed, documented in travel books and brochures and even academic ethnographies that they cannot be experienced for themselves anymore. Tahiti can never really match up to your expectations. After Griffin's book, in fact, even a white person's pilgrimage through the South disguised as a black person cannot be experienced for itself. To try to do it was Joshua Solomon's mistake, and perhaps the reason why his pilgrimage lasted only a day. Merely to impersonate a black person among white people in the South is no way to dispatch the malaise anymore. The only real way to salvage a journey that has been so thoroughly documented, photographed, filmed, and theorized is to get lost, or have your bus break down, or chance upon a black person who has lightened his skin in order to pass as white.

For those of us who are left, there remains only the favorite strategy of intellectuals, what Percy calls “The Familiar Revisited.”²⁸ This is the most advanced strategy of all. Here, after a lifetime of avoiding guided tours, you take the most thoroughly conventional tour you can imagine. Then you step back and watch the watchers. You look at your fellow tourists busily taking their photographs. You look sidelong at the fellow on the mule next to you and try to see the Grand Canyon through his eyes. This is often a strategy of last resort, a strategy for the person who has seen it all. For him, leaving the beaten path has become a beaten path itself, the most worn-out strategy possible. He has to see the world from the shoulders of other people.

Even this may not work anymore. For intellectuals, ironic detachment has become too familiar a stance. You take the mule tour of the Grand Canyon with a knowing wink and write about it for *Harper's*. You go to Disneyland not as a person intending to experience it directly, but as an ironic observer of American ritual. Had Joshua Solomon take this stance, he would have not simply repeated Griffin's experiment, but repeated it and written about it with a wink to the reader: “Isn't this amusing? We are both in on this game.” Yet like all strategies, this one is running its course too, because even the detached ironic stance has become packaged. You know all the steps by heart. So you have to take another step back. It will no longer do to watch the watchers; now you must watch the people who are watching the watchers. You take the mule tour with one of your fellow professors of cultural studies, but instead of watching the Iowans on the tour you watch your fellow professor watch them. And so you keep stepping back, and back, and back, until you step backwards into the canyon itself.

²⁸ Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) 48.