White Like Me

Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness

At the start of a journey into the "night side of American life," which would furnish the material for his Black Like Me (1961), John Howard Griffin strikes up a relationship with a black shoe-shine "boy." Griffin, a white investigative journalist turned black by medical treatments, sunlamp sessions, and black stain, asks for lessons in the ways of Negro life. The shine man, Sterling Williams, "promised perfect discretion and enthusiastically began coaching me." "You just watch me and listen how I talk," says Williams. "You'll catch on" (27). Apparently he does catch on, for Williams soon certifies Griffin's racial transmutation. "Within a short time [Williams] lapsed into familiarity," Griffin writes, "forgetting I was once white. He began to use the 'we' form and to discuss 'our situation.' The illusion of my 'Negro-ness' took over so completely that I fell into the same pattern of talking and thinking. It was my first intimate glimpse. We were Negroes and our concern was the white man and how to get along with him" (28).

Griffin's narrative is only one relatively recent example of a blackface tradition that is fundamentally concerned with a forbidden "lapse into familiarity" between black and white men. No disembodied affair, the ventriloquizing or indeed purloining of black and other cultures has in many instances taken the form of a homosocial dance of white men and black. Whether blackface performers' fascination with slave singers and dancers, Carl Van Vechten's mimicking and brokering of Harlem Renaissance writers, or white-Negro

Norman Mailer's pursuit of Muhammad Ali and others, white men's intercourse with black men has been fraught with masculinist rivalry as well as "compromising" desire. These instances have injected potent fantasies of the black male body into the white Imaginary—and thence into the culture industry. In thus giving shape to the white racial unconscious, such homosocial scenarios actually found the color line even as they witness the latter's continual transgression. Griffin's "We were Negroes" is the perfect summation of this dynamic: renegades together on the "night side." Griffin and Williams enact a racial encounter that is both age-old and implicitly affirming of the Berlin Wall they have momentarily agreed to scale.

For me, this instance raises the question of why and under what circumstances a blackface tradition emerged and continues intermittently to reemerge, if only briefly and in more or less ironized form. My assumption is that blackface is a charged signifier with no coincidental relationship to the racial politics of culture in which it is embedded. Why, we might ask, this literal inhabiting of black bodies as a way of inter-racial male-bonding? There are, after all, alternatives to such a practice; as Griffin's civil-rights-era contemporary Leslie Fiedler argued in Love and Death in the American Novel (1960), our white male writers have been stubbornly preoccupied with white male/dark male dysads (Ishmael and Queequeg. Huck and Jim) which apparently fulfill a white need to be "Negroes" together. The historical fact of white men literally assuming a "black" self, the eternal and predictable return of the racial signifier of blackface, is another matter entirely; and I would argue that it began and continues to occur when the lines of "race" appear both intractable and obstructive, when there emerges a collective desire (conscious or not) to bridge a gulf that is, however, perceived to separate the races absolutely. Griffin's Black Like Me and blackface minstrelsy both exemplify this structure of feeling, the former in its earnest antisegregationist politics, the latter in its derisive but transparently obsessive attempts to try on the accents of "blackness." Blackface acknowledges a racial relationship which to whites seems neither satisfactory nor surmountable; this acknowledgment owes in turn to perceptions of "race" and its signifiers that we would now term "essentialist." To "black up" is to express a belief in the complete suturing together of the markers of "blackness" and the black culture, apparently sundered from the dominant one, to which they refer. John Szwed observes of the withering-away of blackface: "The fact that, say, a Mick Jagger can today perform in the [blackface] tradition without blackface simply marks the detachment of culture from race and the almost
full absorption of a black tradition into white culture." Blackface, then, reifies and at the same time trespasses on the boundaries of "race." I see this doubleness as highly indicative of the shape of American whiteness.

Indeed, in the largest terms this racial trope obliges us to confront the process of "racial" construction itself, the historical formation of whites no less than of blacks. Our typical focus on the way "blackness" in the popular imagination has been produced out of white cultural expropriation and travesty misses how necessary this process is to the making of white American manhood. The latter simply could not exist without a racial other against which it defines itself and which to a very great extent it takes up into itself as one of its own constituent elements. By way of several rather underhistorized instances in the history of blackface miming and of imaginary racial transformation, I want to look at some American constructions of whiteness—in particular this curious dependence upon and necessary internalization of the cultural practices of the dispossessed. My title implies that Griffin's *Black Like Me* is precisely misrepresented, that what Griffin uncovers in his trip through the black South are the contours of straight Caucasian maleness. But to engage this and other post-World War II texts of racial cross-dressing we must acknowledge the American racial histories and cultural products that implicitly structure them. By this of course I mean nineteenth-century blackface performance and other similar texts; but I mean also U.S. imperialism and its material and cultural transactions and results. Encounters with the other both at home and abroad easily become intertwined; as Griffin puts it early on, "the South's racial situation was a blot on the whole country, and especially reflected against us overseas" (8). In examining the racial unconscious of American imperial whiteness, I assume (absent the space adequately to demonstrate it) that the connection between internal and international is intimate. If national esteem in racial matters is related to international prestige—the ability to wield power among foreign races—it is also (or therefore) the case that representations of national racial difference often provide displaced maps for international ones. Not to put too fine a point on it, the domination of international others has depended on mastering the other at home—and in oneself: an internal colonization whose achievement is fragile at best and which is often exceeded or threatened by the gender and racial arrangements on which it depends.

"Brothers For the Time Being"

The minstrel show's great popularity with northern white urban audiences in the middle decades of the nineteenth century has been read as a fairly pat instance of financial and cultural manipulation. With its comic darkies, "plantation melodies," challenge dances, malapropistic wizardry, and general racial revanchism, minstrelsy long cried out for the revisionist critique to which it was only truly subjected in the 1960s and after.

In one of the most thoroughgoing and persuasive such critiques, Alexander Saxton surveys the social origins of certain major minstrel figures, among them T. D. Rice, Dan Emmett, E. P. Christy, and Stephen Foster. Many of the major innovators were northerners of urban origin (none from New England) who were raised in families with intimations of upward mobility. All of them rejected the Protestant ethic and escaped into the latitudes of the entertainment world. In the course of such escape they came into contact with—and stole—the music and dance of slaves and free blacks and first tasted theatrical success in blackface performances. While these "professionals" were sometimes class mutineers, passing up opportunities at a clerkship or better to immerse themselves in the underground world of blackface theater, they nevertheless shared with their families certain political ties to the elite of the Democratic party, the party of Andrew Jackson, antimonopoly, expansionism—and white supremacy. Henry Wood of Christy and Wood's Minstrels was the brother of Fernando Wood, Southern-sympathizing mayor of New York; another brother served three terms as a Democratic Congressman from Buffalo and one term as a state senator. Stephen Foster belonged to a family of ardent Democrats related by marriage to President Buchanan's brother, and Foster himself helped organize a local Buchanan-for-President Club.

Yet it seems to me that one unfortunate effect of this necessary critique has been to reify and even reinforce the cultural domination taking place in the minstrel show. And evidence from performers themselves points to a more complex dynamic, in which such dominitic tendencies coexisted with or indeed depended upon a self-conscious attraction to the black men it was the job of these performers to mimic. Billy Whitlock, banjo player of Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels, said that when on tour in the South he would, as the *New York Clipper* put it, "quietly steal off to some negro hut to hear the darkeys sing and see them dance, taking with him a jug of whiskey to make them all the merrier" (April 13, 1878). More revealingly, performer Ben Cotton claimed that he would sit with and study blacks on Mississippi riverboats: "I used to sit with them in
front of their cabins, and we would start the banjo twanging, and their voices would ring out in the quiet night air in their weird melodies. They did not quite understand me. I was the first white man they had seen who sang as they did; but we were brothers for the time being and were perfectly happy." Self-serving as this is, it nonetheless indicates that a major strain of American bohemia has its origins in blackface performers and enthusiasts. So much the worse for bohemia, perhaps; but in addition to the minor disasters bohemia has perpetrated from Walt Whitman to Carl Van Vechten to Jack Kerouac, there is in its activities an implicit tribute to, or at the very least a self-marginalizing mimicry of, black culture's male representatives. This hardly addresses the social results of such activities, which may be more or less harmful than the exoticism that generated them. But with antebellum blackface performers a set of racial attitudes and cultural styles that in America go by the name of bohemanism first emerged, and in this clumsy courtship of black men the contours of masculine whiteness as we know it began to take a definitive and recognizable form.

Most minstrel performers were minor, apolitical theatrical men of the northern artisanate who pursued a newly available bourgeois dream of freedom and play by paradoxically coding themselves as "black." Indeed if, for men, sexuality is where freedom and play meet, "blackness" was for antebellum bohemanís its virtual condition—a fascinating imaginary space of fun and license seemingly outside but in fact structured by Victorian bourgeois norms. This space seems to have arisen largely from encounters with black men—slave or dancer or vendor—to whom blackface minstrels had much access. For instance, according to legend—the closest we are going to get in the matter—T. D. Rice used an old black stableman's song and dance in his first "Jim Crow" act. Dan Emmett had left his Mt. Vernon, Ohio, home by the age of eighteen (1834) and joined the military, where he learned to play the infantry drum from a man nicknamed "Juba"—a black name, if not a black man, perhaps earned for the style of drum he played. Appearing as a banjo player in various circuses, Emmett was very soon teamed up with dancer Frank Brower, who had learned his dances directly from black men. Stephen Foster no doubt had contact with black wharf workers and boatmen in his hometown of Pittsburgh, but according to his brother he experienced black church singing firsthand through a family servant, Olivia Pisc, "member of a church of shouting colored people." Ralph Keeler ran away from his Buffalo home at the age of eleven and wrote that as a dancer with Johnny Booker's minstrels in the 1850s he "wandered all over the Western country," keeping continual company with that troupe's Negro baggage handler, Ephraim. E. P. Christy reportedly drew material in the late 1830s from One-legged Harrison, a black church singer in Buffalo; Christy said the two had often traded "down home talk." Within the institution of minstrelsy itself, the renowned black dancer Juba (William Henry Lane) provided a link between the cultures, figurings centrally in many challenge-dance contests between black and white dancers. The tableau reiterated in many of these scenes—a white man and a black man becoming, as Ben Cotton put it, "brothers for the time being"—shows up often enough to be a defining interest of these white Negroes, and we might pause over its role in the construction of American whiteness.

For what appears in fact to have been negotiated in blackface performance were certain kinds of masculinity. To put on the cultural forms of "blackness" was to engage in a complex affair of manly mimicry. Examples of this dynamic since the heyday of minstrelsy are ready enough at hand, but in the early nineteenth century it had yet to be given an available public form. To wear or even enjoy blackface was literally, for a time, to become black, to inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon, or gait de coeur that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood. T. D. Rice, his friend F. C. Wemyss, in the event of a bad draw fell into a kind of black homespun when dealing with theater managers, as though indeed into a black-white dyad that reproduced his own felicitous exchanges with black men: "'Looky here, my master, this has been a bad job—I don't think you ought to suffer to this tune; live and let live is a good motto—hand over — and I will give you a receipt in full, and wish you better luck another time.'" How interesting that Rice should assume this humbled sense of masculinity precisely at the guilty moment of payment for expropriated goods, in the process authenticating his claim on the material; how fitting, too, that this disturbing moment of conventional masculinity in the public sphere—the hard bargain, the deal—could with a ventriloquial shift be evaded or at least better managed.

It is worth remarking the way minstrelsy traded on racialized images of masculinity if only because they have become so familiar, indeed ritualized. In North Toward Home (1967), white Mississippian Willie Morris remembers "a stage, when we were about thirteen, in which we 'went Negro.' We tried to broaden our accents to sound like Negroes, as if there were not enough similarity already. We consciously walked like young Negroes, mocking their swinging gait, moving our arms the way they did, cracking our knuckles and whistling between our teeth." I would main-
tain that this dynamic, persisting into adulthood, is so much a part of most American white men's equipment for living that they remain entirely unaware of their participation in it. The special achievement of minstrel performers was to have intuitively and formalized the white male fascination with the turn to black (manhood), which Leslie Fiedler puts this way: "Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle down to being what we really are: white once more." These common white associations of black maleness with the onset of pubescent sexuality indicate that the assumption of dominant codes of masculinity in the United States is partly negotiated through an imaginary black interlocutor. If this suggests that minstrelsy's popularity depended in part on the momentary return of its partisans to a state of arrested adolescence—largely the condition to which dominant codes of masculinity aspire—one must also conclude that white male fantasies of black men undergird the subject positions white men grow up to occupy.

And this is no foregone conclusion—it is full of the fiercest anxieties and potential disturbances. There is evidence, for example, that performers and audiences also found in blackface something closer to a homoerotic charge. Eve Sedgwick has argued that nineteenth-century bohemia was a space, not of infinite heterosexual appetite, but of ambiguous sexual definition, through which young bourgeois men passed on their way to the "repressive, self-ignorant, and apparently consolidated status of the mature bourgeois paterfamilias." Something of this situation applied in the case of minstrel members, certain of whose female impersonations appear, in the context of rough-and-tumble Jacksonian manliness, to have grown out of a sense of sexual ambiguity. Actress Olive Logan wrote that "some of the men who undertake this [wench] business are marvellously well fitted by nature for it, having well-defined soprano voices, plump shoulders, beardless faces, and tiny hands and feet. Many dress most elegantly as women." While she is referring here to post-Civil War female impersonation—which as an American show-business tradition probably got its start in minstrelsy—there is no reason to believe that the wide renown of antebellum "wenches" (George Christy, Barney Williams) owed any less to their aptitude for or predisposition to such roles. And while it is inaccurate simply to read off homosexuality from effeminacy or indeed transvestism, same-sex desire does seem to have been registered by these performers. "Heaps of boys in my locality don't believe yet it's a man in spite of my saying it was," said a Rochester critic of Francis Leon, the most famous postwar female impersonator.

Leon was authentic enough as a female, this writer remarked, "to make a fool of a man if he wasn't sure." Other performers evinced homosexual attractions more obliquely. "A minstrel show came to town and I thought of nothing else for weeks," said Ben Cotton—this from the man who recalled the brotherhood of black and white singers. George Thatcher, well-known later in the century, said of his first encounter with blackface performance in Baltimore: "I found myself dreaming of minstrels; I would awake with an imaginary tambourine in my hand, and rub my face with my hands to see if I was blacked up. . . . The dream of my life was to see or speak to a performer." We might speculate a little as to the referent of the imaginary tambourine; the fantasy of racial conversion enacted in blackface seems to gesture at least toward sexual envy of black men (tambourine as penis), if not desire for them (tambourine as hymen). The fantasy may indeed direct us to a process in which homosexual desire is deflected by identifying with potent male heterosexuality. Perhaps the fantasy indicates only the usefulness of blackface in mediating white men's desire for other white men. In any case it did nothing to redirect myths of black masculinity, to say nothing of white men's attitudes toward women; and it only confirmed black men's status as bearers of black culture, objects of exchange. But it does bring to the surface a more submerged motive for racial intercourse, and it was (and is) probably one moment of most white men's enjoyment of black caricature.

These examples suggest that blackface performance reproduced or instantiated a structured relationship between the races, racial difference itself, as much as black cultural forms. They suggest moreover that this difference was as internal as it was external. To assume the mantle of whiteness, these examples seem to say, is not only to "befriend" a racial other but to introject or internalize its imagined special capacities and attributes. The other is of course "already in us," a part of one's (white) self, filled out according to the ideological shapes one has met in one's entry into the culture. The black male and fantasies about him supply the content of the white male Imaginary, they make up its repertoire. This (racial) splitting of the subject actually makes possible one whole area of white desire—but it also insures that the color line thus erected is constantly open to transgression or disruption.

Several theorists have termed this predicament "abjection." Julia Kristeva writes of the abject that "unconscious contents remain . . . excluded but in strange fashion," clearly enough "for a defensive position to be established" yet "not radically enough to allow for a secure differen-
tiation between subject and object." This glosses very nicely the combined vigilance and absorptive cross-racial fascination of North American whiteness. Deviser of boundaries, "raced" signs and practices by way of engagement with the other, the blackface performer or white-Negro heir, in Kristeva's words, "never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines... constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh" (8). The abolition so redolent of pre-oedipal archaisms is reactivated amid the guilty pleasure we have witnessed in blackface performance, but it is masked with a racial logic. In rationalized Western societies, becoming "white" and male seems to depend upon the remaking of enjoyment, the body, an aptitude for pleasure. It is the other who is always putatively "excessive" in this respect, whether through exotic food, strange and noisy music, outlandish bodily exhibitions, or unremitting sexual appetite. Whites in fact organize their own enjoyment through the other, Slavoj Žižek has written, and access pleasure precisely by fantasizing about the other's "special" pleasure. Hatred of the other arises from the necessary hatred of one's own excess; ascribing this excess to the "degraded" other and indulging it—by imagining, incorporating, or impersonating the other—one conveniently and surreptitiously takes and disavows pleasure at one and the same time. This is the mixed erotic economy, what Homi Bhabha terms the "ambivalence," of American whiteness.24

In practice, this structure has meant, for one thing, that the dispossessed become bearers of the dominant classes' "folk" culture, its repository of joy and revivification.25 And it is here that the agenda of pleasure meets that of domination, white male meets imperial subject. Whether it precedes or follows the dominative logic of imperialism, pleasure in the other is in fact its necessary twin. In the case of blackface these two agendas consorted in extremely complex ways, performance legitimating and sometimes subverting the politics of white supremacy, politics giving rise to an obsessive entertainment of racial difference. Berndt Ostendorf has written that the "lower class folk in Western society, and blacks among them, have served the dominant classes in two ways: first in setting up the material basis of high civilization, second in healing the injuries of that civilization by maintaining alternative life styles and cultures."26 This double bind is the bedrock reality of racial cross-dressing, whatever its local habitation and name.

Elvis As Metaphor

Norman Mailer's "The White Negro" (1957), a text whose mythologies are as telling as its analysis, is of course the post-World War II reinvention of this structure of feeling. As none other than Norman Podhoretz observed in 1958 of the white-Negro discourse of which Mailer's essay was the centerpiece: "I doubt if a more idyllic picture of Negro life has been painted since certain Southern ideologues tried to convince the world that things were just fine as fine could be for the slaves on the old plantation."27 Not a postdating or mere continuation of antebellum racial cross-dressing but its genealogical legacy, this postwar discourse—the Beat writers, Elvis Presley's early career, John Howard Griffin's Black Like Me, and others—did (despite its racial "modernity") reproduce the obsessions of certain nineteenth-century Northern ideologues. To the extent that these obsessions weren't wholly continuous with the dominant culture in the ensuing years of protest, they returned as farce in the late 1960s: Elvis's 1968 comeback TV special, Grace Halsell's Soul Sister (1969) (a second-generation simulacrum, for it imitates Griffin's Black Like Me), and, in a crowning blow (to which I will return), Melvin Van Peebles's Watermelon Man (1970)—in which Godfrey Cambridge in whiteface plays a suburban racist who wakes up one morning to find himself black (too much time under the sunlamp). The almost "classical" resurrection of this trope and of white Negroism generally in the late 1980s and early 1990s—the movie Soul Man (1986); black-folk-filled music videos by Sting, Madonna, Steve Winwood, and many others; Lee Atwater's blues Republicanism (R.I.P.); Vanilla Ice;28 True Identity (1991); Michelle Shocked's Arkansas Traveler (1992)—is as troubling in its ubiquity as it is bewildering in its ideological variegation, but I think these texts too confirm some of the remarks with which I began.29

Mailer's piece codifies the renegade ethic of male sexuality conceived out of and projected onto black men—and always "compromised" by white men's evident attraction to them—that informs the more than metaphorical racial romance underlying the construction of American whiteness:

Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admit) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his
existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm.  

Mailer and other white Negroes inherited a structure of feeling whose self-valorizing marginality and distinction require a virtual impersonation of black manhood. It is revealing that while the specific preoccupations of Mailer's existential errand are far from either Griffin's *Black Like Me* or Elvis Presley, the shape of this white mythology looks pretty much the same in all cases.

Its resonance is, for instance, succinctly articulated in white guitarist Scotty Moore's remark to Presley at one of the mid-1950s recording sessions in which Elvis first found his voice: "Damn, nigger!"  

As Nelson George has observed, Elvis was the historical referent Mailer missed in limning the "white Negro." Bringing to the stage the sort of "symbolic fornication" that for whites denotes "blackness," his hair pomaded imitating blacks' putative imitation of whites, Elvis illustrates the curious dependence of white working-class manhood on imitations of fantasized black male sexuality. It is true that in Elvis's case we must be clear about the precise nature of the indebtedness; nobody who thinks with their ears can dismiss Presley as merely a case of racial rip-off. I agree with Greil Marcus that Elvis's working-class origins already placed him as close to Bobby Bland as to Perry Como—that in creating what was after all a distinctive rather than derivative sound he didn't so much steal the blues as live up to them. Yet fantasies of "blackness" were unquestionably crucial in shaping a persona capable of such a task.

One image in particular stands out for its greater sublimation of this racial narrative. Much has been made of Presley's 1968 Christmas special, when after several years of silly movies and lifeless singing he roared back in black leather on network television. Marcus rightly identifies the central drama of the show as Elvis's attempt to win back his audience, and he demonstrates the way in which Elvis pulled all the stops out to do so. We might, however, also pause over the curious form of the show, in which Broadway productions of Elvis numbers (Elvis had not yet entered his Vegas period) alternate with an "unplugged" circle of Elvis and fellow musicians getting raw. In these latter scenes the black leather of his outfit defines the ambience; it refuses to slip from the viewer's mind; Presley himself remarks upon how hot it is. Both Elvis's look and the doubled structure of the show seem to me to call up the racial themes I have been developing. Particularly in a show dedicated to proving how foreordained and irrelevant is all the music since Elvis's early triumphs (stage patter 

at one point has Elvis damning with faint praise "the Beatles, the Beards, and the whoever"), its "blues" portions appear to mediate (against all odds and despite the artist's intentions) what had been going on in the streets by the time it aired in late 1968. That is to say, the split show structure suggests the meaning of the suit and the "black" performances: they are the "unconscious" of the production numbers—white as the whale—that surround them. In the leather-suited takes, and in songs such as the following year's "In the Ghetto," Elvis reveals his reliance even for resurrection upon "blackness." And his ever-increasing stature as the icon of white American culture, a fulfillment of the dubious potential augured by the comeback special's production numbers, only clinches my sense of the necessary centrality and suppression of "blackness" in the making of American whiteness.  

*Black Like Me* turns this structure into social criticism. While Griffin has "blacked up" to beat his forebears, his text is not a story of passing. In fact he has only spotty interest in what blacks think of him; his concern is with whites and how they will treat him in his adopted state. Whiteness is his standard: "Do you suppose they'll treat me as John Howard Griffin, regardless of my color—or will they treat me as some nameless Negro, even though I am still the same man?" Griffin asks some friends, among whom, incidentally, are three FBI agents (10). It is the position of "nameless Negro," not member of any community one might care to name, that interests Griffin. He passes less into a black world than into a "black" part of himself, the remissible pleasures of abjection, triggered or enabled by white distaste and aversion. (Some of which is his own—he speaks of the idea of turning black as having "haunted" him "for years" before undertaking his effort [71].) What he goes on to uncover are the contours of blackness for whites: contours he has externalized and thus indulges in his very disguise.

This racial logic underlies Griffin's whole enterprise. In revealing ways, *Black Like Me* is complicitous with the racial designs it sets out to expose. Griffin seems only dimly aware, for instance, that his disguise is an externalization, and yet there is evidence that his imagination of "blackness" colors him before his blackface does. Early on, pondering the dangers of his experiment, Griffin is gratified to find his wife ready, while he is gone, "to lead, with our three children, the unsatisfactory family life of a household deprived of husband and father" (9). That this is an unconscious reference to the much-bruited female-headed black family that would soon be mythologized in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965) is indicated by Griffin's other
mentions of the sadly depaternalized black family—as in: "[The black man's] wife usually earns more than he. He is thwarted in his need to be father-of-the-household" (90; see also 42). Even when Griffin is white, that is, he is "black" inside; it is this part of his "make-up" that he explores in Black Like Me.

One need not look far for the sources of this concern in Griffin's text. Early in his days of blackness, Griffin, for reasons that appear as unclear to him as they do to us, walks down his hotel hallway in the early hours of the morning (he can't sleep) to the men's room. There he encounters two black men, one in the shower and the other naked on the floor awaiting his turn. Griffin writes that the waiting man "leaned back against the wall with his legs stretched out in front of him. Despite his state of undress, he had an air of dignity" (19). This rather anxious (and certainly clichéd) assurance to the reader has its counterpart in Griffin's remark to the man: "You must be freezing on that bare floor, with no clothes on." (20). As if things weren't bare enough all around, the waiting man "flick[s] back the wet canvas shower curtain" and implores the bather to let Griffin wash his hands in the shower. (A nearby sink has been discovered to have no drain pipe.) Griffin hastily interjects:

"That's all right, I can wait," I said.
"Go ahead," he nodded.
"Sure—come on," the man in the shower said. He turned the water down to a dribble. In the shower's obscurity, all I could see was a black shadow and gleaming white teeth. I stepped over the other's outstretched legs and washed quickly, using the soap the man in the shower thrust into my hands. When I had finished, I thanked him. (20)

Clearly the driving force here is the simultaneously fascinating and threatening proximity of black male bodies, beckoning, stretching, thrusting. If the accident of the scene's having occurred is not revealing, Griffin's retrospective mapping of it surely is. Moments like this put Griffin in the position of racial voyeur, allow him to confront the "shadows" of the white Imaginary. Paradoxically, as with his tutorials with the shine man, Sterling Williams, their result is to help Griffin identify with black men; "I fell into the same pattern of talking and thinking," he says of Williams (28). Whether or not as a defense against interracial homoerotic desire, Griffin in any case mentally assumes and impersonates— one might almost say he "masters"—the position and shape of black maleness. Poised in his disguise between white subject and black object, Griffin enters "blackness" according to the dictates of white desire.

This indeed emerges from the many pages that are taken up with conversations a hitchhiking Griffin has with white men who pummel him with questions about his sex life. "There's plenty white women would like to have a good buck Negro," says one (86); another man, with an "educated flair" (86), opines that blacks "don't get so damned many conflicts"; "I understand you make more of an art—or maybe hobby out of your sex than we do" (87). Griffin's disgust at this predictable turn of events disguises the homosocial nature of the dialogues. For in these conversations, white men's interest in black male sexuality is mediated by but also identifies them with the white women black men are supposed to crave. In other words, the voyeuristic urge to expose the black man's body in congress with a white woman is quite cognate with fantasies of the forbidden coupling of black and white men—a coupling, after all, that Griffin has in effect been engaged in. These car scenes, of course, merely reiterate the shower scene, and implicitly place Griffin in the white male driver's seat as well as in that of the black passenger. Griffin's conscious distaste permits him both to distance himself from the debased discourse of which he is structurally the victim (the walking black penis that forms the object of white male desire) and to engage in that obsessive discourse through the pleasures of impersonation.

Leaving to one side Black Like Me's stated intent of showing for the first time what it was like to be black in the segregated South—as though plenty of black-authored books had not investigated that predicament already—Griffin's text can be read as a story of what happens when this sexualized racial unconscious of American whiteness is not, as in the foregoing instances, kept suppressed or partitioned. It is all very well to fetishize black male bodies, as Griffin does above and also when he remembers seeing black dockworkers in Mobile "striped to the waist, their bodies glistening with sweat under their loads" (99). But it is quite another thing, Griffin finds, to inhabit a black body. In a scene before the mirror that reveals his blackness to him for the first time, Griffin experiences total self-negation:

Turning off all the lights, I went into the bathroom and closed the door. I stood in the darkness before the mirror, my hand on the light switch. I forced myself to flick it on.

In the flood of light against white tile, the face and shoulders of a stranger—a fierce, bald, very dark Negro—glared at me from the glass. He in no way resembled me. (15)

The transformation, Griffin says, "was total and shocking"; he feels "imprisoned in the flesh of an utter stranger"; "all traces of the John Griffin I
had been were wiped from existence” (15). “White skin,” to play on Frantz Fanon, is here obliterated by “black mask”—a possibility only available to someone who imagines skin color in the way Griffin apparently does, as completely constitutive of identity and entirely divisive of the races. He fears he has gone too far: “the black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been” (16). Any sense of double perspective that chances to emerge—for instance, Griffin remarks that he “became two men, the observing one and the one who panicked”—melts away under the feeling of being “Negroid even into the depths of his entrails” (16). Fantasy here returns as frightening fact. What Richard Dyer calls the “hysterical boundedness of the white body” has been transgressed; while Griffin appears not to believe in the moral superiority of whiteness, he yet cannot let go of its powerful, life-preserving fixity.10 Griffin’s disorientation is true to Lacan’s account of the mirror stage, though it produces a failed one, for his response reveals the (black) upon which whiteness depends but disallows an idealization of the mirror image that might heal the lack. Confronted with a “black” self-image, Griffin simply empties out the self. In what is perhaps an allusion to Ralph Ellison, Griffin writes that “The Griffin that was had become invisible” (16).

We ought, at this moment of crisis, to look at Watermelon Man, which, nine years after Black Like Me, alludes in turn to Griffin’s travails. Watermelon Man’s white protagonist, Jeff Gerber, awakes in the middle of the night, stumbles to the bathroom, looks in the mirror, and experiences precisely Griffin’s sense of self-negation upon learning that he has become black. In the first part of the film, Gerber (Godfrey Cambridge) is a jocular though devoted racist whose compulsive engagement with “blackness” undergirds or buttresses his whiteness. He exercises while singing blackface tunes (“Jimmy Crack Corn”) and stages imaginary boxing bouts with Muhammad Ali (“you’re a credit to your race,” he says to an imaginary Ali). The film gives body to this fascination by way of Gerber’s ongoing sarcastic banter with three black men: a bus driver, an elevator operator, and a lunch-counter waiter (played, in a stroke of casting genius, by an aged Mantan Moreland—the perennially frightened sidekick from the Charlie Chan movies). Disdainful of the black urban insurrections on television that comprise the film’s soundtrack, yet everywhere dropping into “black” dialect and other “black” affectations, Gerber reveals that white supremacy has as one of its constituent (if unconscious) elements an imaginary closeness to black culture.

His sudden turn to black is thus both a logical and a scarifying one. Transfixed before the mirror, Gerber is at first frightened; he then hyste-

cally acts out his subject/object split. He shadowboxes in the mirror the imaginary Ali he has now become; chants “how now brown cow”; robs his mirror image at gunpoint; drinks some milk; gets an idea and looks down his pants (but: “that’s an old wives’ tale,” he says); soaps himself; and “proves” by his bridgework that the man in the mirror is really himself. The frenzied shifts in subject-position, from white to black to white again, point out what Van Peebles is ultimately after in the film—a state-of-the-race address on black self-hatred. Posed against Black Like Me, it offers, in other words, a perspective on the status of black masculinity apart from white male fantasy.

No simple affirmations are forthcoming, though. Much of the impact of Watermelon Man stems from its implication that the identities of both white and black men owe a heavy debt to a sort of displaced minstrelsy. Lamenting his new color, Gerber cries that his kids won’t love him anymore, won’t understand: “wait till I get down on my knee and I sing ‘Mammy!’” The inevitable Jolson joke is actually a rather complex figure in this context. Surely it suggests a Gerber in blackface, referring once again to the obsession with blackness. But it also puts a black Gerber in blackface, lays a burden of white-filtered black images on his shoulders. As in Fanon, Gerber undergoes the self-berthing attendant upon blacks in the West and devalues and ridicules his race accordingly. Soon Gerber is tracking down all the skin lighteners, hair straighteners, facial molds, and milk baths he can find. If as a white man he had wanted to be black, and dedicated many hours under the sunlamp to attain it, as a black man he wants just the opposite. No wonder Negroes riot, he says—the facial creams don’t work.

Ultimately a simple attention to the facts of everyday life forces him to sympathize with the black militants and then become one. In fantastical form, then, Gerber experiences the transmogrification into “blackness” that the film perceives blacks generally to have experienced in the 1960s. Meanwhile Gerber’s blackness comes between him and his wife, Althea (Estelle Parsons); she leaves and takes the kids to her mother’s home in Indiana. The primal scene of the interracial marriage bed is crucial as well to the climax of Griffin’s Black Like Me—but in light of Watermelon Man it carries a very different meaning. For Melvin Van Peebles’s Watermelon Man, the way out of black racial mimicry or minstrelsy is into a militant blackness; its consequence is a refusal of desire for the white woman’s body. (Jeff Gerber’s chief moment of black self-understanding, a foretaste of the problematic gender politics of Van Peebles’s Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song [1971], occurs as he stares into the mirror of a black bar;
doubt emblematic of Griffin’s travels and transgressions. It appears that to cross the line is to encounter one’s imagined other head-on, throwing whiteness into jeopardy.

Or into self-mimicry. One result of all this is that whiteness itself ultimately becomes an impersonation. The subterranean components of whiteness that so often threaten it require an edgy, constant patrolling. If Watermelon Man too easily leaves Jeff Gerber in a black, deministrelized zone, his selfhood no longer routed through white fantasies of blacks, Black Like Me throws John Griffin back into a whiteness that has been decisively disrupted and must be shored up. At the end of Griffin’s book, the citizens of his hometown try to run him out: “But I felt I must remain a while longer. . . . I could not allow them to say they had ‘chased’ me out.” (155). This final imitation of white manhood, Griffin’s righteous “last stand”—conceptually indistinguishable, as Richard Slotkin has shown, from notions of hegemonic whiteness and symmetrically opposed to the ending of Watermelon Man—is the goal toward which his text has tended. “White like me” precisely names the internal division, the white self impersonating itself, that is the consequence of white men’s fantasized proximity to black men. If Fanon’s work and Watermelon Man give anti-imperialist force to the racist adage that “good” blacks are “white inside,” the texts I’ve examined suggest that whiteness harbors some secrets of its own.

Notes

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4 Several scholars have begun to undertake such a task, and I am much in


6 Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology," American Quarterly 27, no. 1 (1975): 5–7, 15–16. See also Saxton’s "George Wilkes: The Transformation of a Radical Ideology," American Quarterly 33, no. 4 (1981): 437–58, for some of the other activities of the milieu that nourished blackface performers. Edward LeRoy Rice’s Monarchs of Minstrelsy from "Daddy" Rice to Date (New York: Kenny, 1911) is the most comprehensive, if often sketchy, source for profiles of blackface performers.

7 "Interview with Ben Cotton," New York Mirror, July 3, 1897.


11 Ralph Kecel, "Three Years As a Negro Minstrel," Atlantic Monthly 24, no. 141 (1869): 77.

12 Quoted in Toll, Blacking Up, p. 46.


14 F. C. Wemyss, Theatrical Biography; or, The Life of an Actor and Manager (Glasgow: R. Griffin, 1848), p. 179.


In the minstrel show, this dynamic extended in several directions. In addition to the traffic in women effected by minstrelsy’s derisive "wench" characters (played by men), white male bonding occurred over the bodies of black men as well. This homosocial bonding was, oddly, mediated by white men’s appropriations of "black" maleness—a peculiar kind of traffic in black men.
19 Quoted in Toll, Blacking Up, p. 142.
20 "Interview with Ben Cotton."
28 Interestingly, Vanilla Ice’s biographer argues for his subject’s racial indeterminacy: "Ice’s family was hardly the ‘white bread’ existence of The Brady Bunch. With regard to the rest of his family tree, he claims to be ‘part Apache. I am also part Cuban, but other than that I’m really not sure.’" Mark Bego, Ice, Ice, Ice: The Extraordinary Vanilla Ice Story (New York: Dell, 1991), p. 22. But see Armond White on the same performer: "What Vanilla Ice has to say (nothing) leaves his representation of whiteness as his only point." "The White Albums: Is Black Music Under Siege?" City Sun 8, no. 49 (1990): 19.
29 Two striking images, one academic and one popular, underscore those remarks. The first, from the journal Transition, accompanies an article by Jerome McCristal Culp, Jr., which asks whether legal theorist Richard Posner would "come to the same conclusions about racial difference and the law"—that is, that race doesn’t matter—if he were black; twin photos feature Posner as he is and Posner artificially blackened. This kind of essentialism (criticized by Culp himself in regard to gender), with intellectual positions the forordained result of a writer’s race, is somewhat surprising from a journal edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, who have devoted much of their work to contesting it. ("The Education of Richard Posner," Transition 52 [1991]: 114–22; quotation at p. 120.) The second, from Insight magazine, accompanies a news story critical of "discrimination testers," fake job applicants of various races who check the fairness of employment agencies’ hiring practices. The photo, a man whose right half is white and right half black, refers to the “sameness” of the putative applicants in everything but pigmentation and imagines that such efforts toward racial justice themselves raise the specter of “race,” willfully splitting the body politics—worse, one guesses, than the already existing racism the magazine apparently supports. (Elena Neuman, “Staking Out the Hiring Line,” Insight, December 9, 1991, pp. 12–13, 36, 38.) This image is absolutely opposed to the thrust of, say, Michael Jackson’s extraordinary video “Black or White” (1991) (though a foolish few have missed the point), whose racial “morphing" sequence melds races and faces even as it counteracts the lived reality of racial particularity. Race, here, is imagined mutable; the burden of its construction is briefly thrown off, the line between self and other blurred. Unlike the thinking behind the blackface tradition, to which the Transition and Insight graphics are implicitly indebted, the video generally acknowledges the flawed and permeable, if not indeed inessential and constructed, character of the outlines of “race.”
33 Marcus, Mystery Train, pp. 186, 181.
35 Dyer, "White": 63. Griffin did not, as is still widely rumored, die as a belated result of his skin treatments (Sharpe, "Man Who Changed His Skin," p. 55)—a rumor whose persistence (roughly half of those I spoke to about this essay repeated it) attests either to a continuing desire to punish Griffin for his transgressions and guard the color line or to a continuing fascination with white-liberal martyrdom. Either way, the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.
37 Cf. Louis Armstrong’s irony in "What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue": "I'm white / Inside / But that don’t help my case / Cause I / Can’t hide / What is in my face." Filmmaker Leah Giliam plays with some of these binaries in Now Pretend (1992), an explicit meditation on Black Like Me.