In 1985, the English physicist Stephen Hawking lost his voice. Hawking suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, a degenerative neurological illness. Over the years Hawking's illness had left his voice increasingly slurred and difficult to understand, but it was not until an episode of pneumonia forced him to have a tracheostomy that Hawking lost his voice completely. After the tracheostomy, Hawking could not speak at all. He could communicate only by raising his eyebrows when someone pointed to the correct letter on a spelling card.

Several years later, a computer specialist from California sent him a computer program called Equalizer. Equalizer allowed Hawking to select words from a series of menus on a computer screen by pressing a switch, or by moving his head or eyes. A voice synthesizer then transformed the words into speech. The computer was a vast improvement on the spelling card system, and for the most part, Hawking was also pleased with the voice synthesizer. "The only trouble," he wrote in a 1993 essay, "is that it gives me an American accent." Yet Hawking then went on to say that after years of using the voice synthesizer the American voice came to feel like his own. He started to identify with that voice, and feel as if it were really his. "I would not want to change even if I were offered a British-sounding voice," Hawking wrote. "I would feel I had become a different person."

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson used to ask his graduate students if a blind man's cane is part of the man. Most students would say no, that the limits of a person stop at his skin. But if Hawking is right, then the answer may be more complicated. For despite the fact that Hawking's "voice" was computer-synthesized, despite the fact that it came from a set of audio speakers rather than from his mouth, despite the fact that the synthesized voice sounded mechanical, robotic, and worse still, American, Hawking eventually came to feel that it was his voice. Hawking's identity, at least in his view, does not stop at the boundaries of his skin.

How exactly is a voice related to an identity? Many of us feel as if our voices are, in some vague and undefined way, our voices, an immutable part of who we are, but in fact our voices are changing all the time. The voice of a person at five years of age will sound different from the voice of the same person at age forty-five, and her voice will sound different again at age seventy-five. An Alabaman living in North Dakota probably will not speak with the same accent that he speaks with back in Tuscaloosa. A black American may sound different when speaking to other black Americans at home or at church than she does when speaking to white Americans at the office. Our voices even sound noticeably different to us from the inside, first-person standpoint than they sound to other people. For many of us, it still comes as a mild shock to hear our own voices on tape.

Hawking's remarks about his voice synthesizer reflect two tensions in modern identity that run through many debates over enhancement technologies. The first is a tension between the natural and the artificial, or more broadly, between what is given and what is created. The reason it initially sounds jarring to hear Hawking say he identifies so closely with a computer-generated voice is precisely because it has been generated by a computer, rather than by nature itself. Yet the fact that Hawking does identify with the computer-generated voice reflects something of the flexibility of modern identity. It is not uncommon these days for people to say they feel more like themselves while taking Prozac or typing in an online chat room, or that it was only after undergoing cosmetic surgery or taking anabolic steroids that their bodies began to look the way they were meant to look. Statements like these sound odd (and merit a deeper look) precisely because they confound what we expect to hear. We may expect to hear that an artificial technology makes a person feel better about herself, but we don't usually expect to hear that it makes her feel more like herself.

Related to this tension between the given and the created is a second tension, between the self as it feels from the inside and the self as it is presented to others. Most modern Westerners have some sense that there is a gap between self and self-presentation — between the self that sits

God talks like we do. — Lewis Grizzard, Atlanta Journal-Constitution
down 1-77 from Charlotte to investigate. Our moment offame. In anticipa-
tion, we would all sit around the television and look at Clover through the
lens of the television camera. "They sound like such hicks." It was true. They
did sound like hicks. They

Southerners have a complicated relationship with their accents, a
complex mixture of pride and shame and fierce defensiveness. It's like a
little brother who is a drunk or maybe a little crazy and therefore some-
what embarrassing — you are always shaking your head when his name is
mentioned — but you can't really disown him because, well, damn it,
his family. Most southerners, when they talk to Yankees, will defend
a southern accent as the most beautiful and melodic of all American
accents, but deep down we are not really convinced this is true. Many of
us modify our speech, often unconsciously, when we are around out-
siders, and talk more southern in the company of one another. Some of us
even learn to speak Yankee at work or when we are visiting up North.
Many of us wish not so much to get rid of our southern accents as to get a
better one, an accent that evokes a genteel, mythical old South rather
than, say, The Beverly Hillbillies. Nobody explicitly teaches us this, but we
somehow absorb the lesson that north of the Mason-Dixon line a south-
ern accent generally codes for stupidity or simplenessedness. You can
watch only so many movies and television shows featuring big-bellied
southern sheriffs, sweaty fundamentalist preachers, and shotgun-carrying rednecks before the message sinks in. We learn early on that in
certain settings, like universities, a southern accent needs to be moder-
ated, if not effaced, or else you will not be taken seriously.
When I was growing up in Clover, our small corner of South Carolina,
it would occasionally happen that someone in town would accomplish
something worthy of attention from the local television news stations.
The high school football team would make it to the upper state champi-
onships. A local preacher would accidentally burn down a church. Once,
I remember, state law enforcement authorities staged an undercover
sting operation and caught a local policeman stealing chocolate Easter
eggs and frozen steaks from the grocery store. When these newsworthy
events occurred, teams of television news reporters would make the trip
down I-77 from Charlotte to investigate. Our moment of fame. In anticipa-
tion, we would all sit around the television and look at Clover through the
lens of the television camera.
It was always a little embarrassing. The reporter would ask someone
from Clover a question on camera, the Cloverite would answer, and my
parents would immediately groan and shake their heads. "Why do they
always pick these kinds of people to be on TV?" my father would say.
"They sound like such hicks." It was true. They did sound like hicks. They
would draw out their words in a country twang. They would say insurance, with the emphasis on the first syllable. Greenville became Grainville. Here became hair and hair became hay-ur. They sounded like one of those guys with overalls and a banjo on Hee Haw. Yet we never noticed this until we saw these people on television. Had we come across the very same people in the barbershop or the public library or in church, it would never have occurred to us that they had an accent. To be honest, their accents were probably no different from ours.

What interested me about this was the way the distinctiveness of our local accent was hidden from us until we pulled back and saw it—or rather listened to it—from the position of someone else. It was only by watching television, looking through the lens of the camera, that we were able to see what we ordinarily took for granted. What was most obvious to a television viewer, of course, was the way the local accents compared to the other ones on TV, which are all non-southern (that is to say, Yankee) accents. The television news reporters may well have been southerners themselves, but even southerners talk like Yankees when they are on TV. It is an unspoken convention: if you are on TV you talk like a Yankee. Everyone does. If you don't, you sound like a hick.

It is an unspoken convention: if you are on TV you talk like a Yankee. Everyone does. If you don’t, you sound like a hick.

Lilli Ambro told me that most of her clients at The Perfect Voice are people who have to do a lot of public speaking, like actors or certain kinds of businesspeople. One was, unsurprisingly, a television news reporter. Another was an aspiring actress whose acting coaches had advised her that to have a successful career she would need to be able to switch her southern accent on and off. All were southerners except one. The exception was a man from Pennsylvania running for local public office who wanted to reduce his northern accent in order to improve his chances for election. (This knife cuts both ways. In the South, a northern accent codes for arrogance and bad manners.) Most (though not all) of her clients were white. It goes without saying, perhaps, that most of these clients felt they needed to change their accents in order to succeed at work, and felt strongly enough about it that they were willing to pay $45/hour to undergo a successful "dialect change."

What sort of accents were these people trying to change? In her book on cosmetic surgery, sociologist Kathy Davis notes how difficult it was for her, as an outsider observer, to guess exactly what feature of themselves the potential clients wanted cosmetic surgery for—that many of the women who wanted nose jobs did not have obviously large or misshapen noses, or that many of those who wanted breast reductions did not have obviously large or asymmetrical breasts. The “defects” that bothered them so much seemed to be exaggerated in their own eyes. So I wondered aloud to Ambro whether there was a parallel in her work—whether it was ever difficult for an outsider to see exactly why these people wanted their accents changed. “No,” she replied immediately; it was not hard to see why these people wanted to change. They all had very “strong” southern accents, she said. When I pressed her on what she meant by this, it became clear that most of her clients sounded like country folk or hillbillies. They were worried not so much about sounding southern as about sounding like hicks. Which made sense: this was the South, after all, where most people talk with southern accents. The worry in the South is not to get rid of your accent, like an expatriate southerner trying to pass in the North, but rather to transform it to a better one (which generally means something closer to what Ambro calls a “standardized American” accent). Ambro told me that she does not generally get clients who want to rid themselves of a Tidewater Virginia accent, say, or an old Charleston accent, or any of the accents that sound especially well bred to southern ears. Yet she did admit that she occasionally tried to convince some of her clients that accents that sounded objectionable to their own ears were actually quite lovely.

I have to confess that when I called Lilli Ambro, I was skeptical about the notion of accent-reduction clinics, notwithstanding Ms. Ambro’s good intentions and her charming manners. Expatriate southerners like me are likely to worry excessively that distinctive features of the South are going to disappear; that in a vast consumerist sea, an age of generic TV news anchors speaking standardized American, southern accents will go the way of the corner barber shop and the porch swing. (Or, possibly even worse, that a southern accent will become a curiosity piece to be marketed to Yankees, like small-batch bourbon and alligator farms.) But what worried me most was the sense that by trying to change your accent, you are rejecting something of who you are. Unlike a Chinese or Cuban immigrant who speaks English with an accent, we southerners are raised to speak the way we do. It is our mother tongue. It is the first thing that non-southerners notice about us when we open our mouths. To try to speak like a northerner, quite honestly, strikes me as phoniness—perhaps necessary phoniness on occasion, and a kind of phoniness to which we are all prone, but phoniness nonetheless. This is also what rubs me the wrong way about some enhancement technologies especially those designed to efface markers of ethnicity. They look pretty close to facery.

I once had a colleague at McGill University who spoke with a perfect upper-class English accent. It was only when I asked him what part of England he was from that I found out he was born and raised in Ontario.
He had spent a couple of years at Oxford as a student many decades previously. Apparently he had adopted an English accent while he was there, and had hung onto it ever since. I can’t remember ever having met a southerner who would affect an Oxford accent (where I come from, Oxford is a town in Mississippi), or who would even feel inclined to try, but many southerners do try to talk standardized American, or what they think is standardized American, saying “you” instead of “y’all” and articulating their words very carefully. In the United Kingdom, the BBC has made a nod toward acknowledging the legitimacy of regional accents by occasionally substituting Scots-, Irish-, and Welsh-accented newscasters for the traditional Englishmen. But in the United States, the newscasters all speak as if they come from nowhere — which to a southern ear, usually sounds like somewhere up North. (A Tennessene once met in Chicago told me that all Americans should hang on to their native accents or else we would all sound like we come from Indi-goddamn-ana.)

The newspaper piece that led me to The Perfect Voice was written for the Greensboro News and Record by a reporter with the southern-accented name of Parker Lee Nash. She is a self-described “southern girl, raised by bootleggers and Baptists,” and her attitude toward The Perfect Voice could probably be best described as ironic and gently mocking. (She writes that to talk like a Yankee, you have to “open your mouth big and wide and relax your tongue so it flops up and down like a dog lapping water.”) What interested me most about her article was the lighthearted remark she concluded with. After spending a day in accent-reduction classes, learning things like how to say “ham” in such a way that it does not contain two syllables, she concluded, “All the accent reduction classes in America can’t take the Southern out of me. Thank the Lord.”

Implicit in that offhand remark, it seemed to me, was both the worry about an accent change — Am I trying to change who I am? — and the reassurance that this worry is misplaced ("No, being southern is about more than having a southern accent"). And so I began to wonder whether clients at an accent-reduction clinic had any mixed feelings about their change — whether they felt that putting on an accent was artificial, or a betrayal of their heritage.

When I put this question to Lilli Ambro, she proceeded (as southerners are inclined to do) to tell me a story. She once had a client who was a preacher. Or more precisely, he was a sort of junior preacher, an assistant to a more senior pastor in a local church. She wasn’t sure what denomination, but it wasn’t Presbyterian or Episcopalian — more likely it was Baptist, or some poor relation. This preacher was from out in the country and he had an appropriately countrified accent. His senior minister had told him that he needed to work on the way he spoke, or else the congregation wouldn’t take him seriously. Hence his visit to The Perfect Voice. Interestingly enough, he did not last any longer than a lesson or two. The reason, he said, was because he felt that the accent-reduction classes were changing his personality. (Almost as an afterthought, Ambro added, “He never did pay his bill.”)

As odd as this preacher’s reaction initially sounded to me, I think I can understand it. To paraphrase Kurt Vonnegut, if you pretend for long enough, you may become what you are pretending to be. Yet when I mentioned the story to a colleague from the North, a philosopher at an Ivy League university, he was puzzled by the thought that anyone could feel that his identity was bound up in anything as trivial and incidental as an accent. Southerners, of course, usually understand the connection between accent and identity right away. So does anyone from the United Kingdom, where accent is a very public marker of social class, perhaps even the most important one. The British often confess to tremendous anxiety about accent, and what it reveals about social standing. And indeed, expatriates of all sorts in the United Kingdom are constantly made aware of their accents, and what the accent reveals about their geographical origins. I suspect that the thought that an accent is incidental to identity would occur mainly to people who have never had attention called to their own . . .

In the vast museum of American consumerist oddities, accent-reduction clinics like The Perfect Voice probably merit little more than a small corner display. Yet there are at least two aspects to them that are worth thinking about more carefully, in light of the consumerist forces that drive the development of enhancement technologies. One is the way the language of illness is used to describe, however lightheartedly, the process of changing your accent. You do it at a clinic, and you are treated by a speech pathologist. In fact, you are not really changing your accent; you are “reducing” it, as if it had somehow ballooned out of control, like your weight or your blood sugar, and you need treatment in order to rein it back in.

The other thing to notice is just what is being sold at the accent-reduction clinic. Enhancement technologies are usually marketed and sold by taking advantage of a person’s perception that she is deficient in some way. Accent reduction is no different. What is being sold at the accent-reduction clinic is old-fashioned, American-style self-improvement, and the yardstick on which the self-improvement is measured is social status and success at work. The accent-reduction clinic takes advantage of the perception (or perhaps the reality) that non-southerners see a southern accent as something to be hidden or overcome, and that even southerners themselves see certain kinds of southern accents as better than others. (The reason why it is better to talk like Scarlett

What is being sold at the accent-reduction clinic is . . . social status and success at work.
and Rhett than those guys in the overalls in Deliverance is clear enough. But behind the more subtle gradations of accent is a peculiar sort of ancestor worship practiced by some white southerners that associates certain accents with a distinguished genealogy. If The Perfect Voice is in any way representative, the people most inclined to change their accents are those whose success at work depends on the successful public presentation of themselves — actors, business people, news readers, and the occasional minister.

It is the relationship between public performance and the inner life that produces the mixed feelings that I suspect many southerners would have about an accent-reduction clinic. Southerners are quite familiar with public performance, of course; there is a good reason for all those self-dramatizing southern women in the plays of Tennessee Williams. But self-dramatization is one thing, and pretending to be a Yankee is another. Talking like a northerner would strike many southerners as a necessary evil at best, and at worst, a form of selling your birthright. It is a form of "passing," of hiding what is distinctive about your cultural identity. (The proper southern response to being made to feel ashamed of your accent, of course, is to exaggerate it.)

NOTES
2N. Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 84.
5See Nash, "My Fair Lady."