

# Refusal to See: A Concise History of Racial and Disability Passing

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## Introduction

Perhaps neither by accident nor small coincidence the term “passing” is used to refer to death—points to the one-dying’s absence and loss and to one’s life as it comes to its end, as one “go[es] to one’s spiritual destination”<sup>1</sup>—because passing effects upon the one-passing a little death: of self, identity, and community, when one “come[s] to an end, cease[s] to exist.”<sup>2</sup> This meaning proves apt since the concept and practice of passing are steeped in loss, moreover in “a sort of life in death”<sup>3</sup> that results in the purposeful extinguishing and extinction of self. In no way the “playful”<sup>4</sup> sort of passing that comes from the dramaturgical practices of those who are able to slip between worlds undetected and unmolested, the passing of which we speak in these pages is the deliberate, permanent or near-permanent taking on of another identity, what Drake and Cayton call a “sociological death and rebirth,” since, particularly with racial passing, individuals who pass must “break all their current social ties and then create new ones to pass successfully.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, those who pass permanently manage to kill off their pasts by masking a sociopolitically “spoiled”<sup>6</sup> and “hated identity with a less threatening one.”<sup>7</sup>

While the theory and practice of passing may seem straightforwardly about deception and fraudulence wherein “visual codes evade the duped spectators,”<sup>8</sup> it emerges instead as a trope with multivariate meanings—meanings nearly as varied as the term’s myriad present and obsolete etymological roots. And passing manifests across a wide array of sociocultural power struggles, historically and of late falling along “issues of gender, [sexuality,] religion, class, ability, health, crime, and punishment.”<sup>9</sup> Originating from the Anglo-Norman, Old French, and Middle French verbs *passer*, initially meaning “to get across, [or] to cause or enable to get across,”<sup>10</sup> passing invokes a metaphorical bridge that spans the life circumstances between that from which one walks away and that which one seeks, be it moving onward and making one’s way, moving past or from one set of experiences to another, moving from scrutiny toward gaining acceptance or admittance, or to cross literally or figuratively from life to death.

Although one can never lose one's past, the more one considers the practice of passing the more it becomes clear that, at its root, passing is always and forever a loss: a little death. For passing is attempted only when those imposing social or legal coercion make plain that the way one "is" is perceived by the dominating<sup>11</sup> group as wrong, undesirable, dangerous, demonic, or pathological. Passing is only attempted when an individual reaches the shattering conclusion that it has become too difficult or dangerous to remain oneself. Not attempted out of avarice, greed, or whim, with few exceptions passing is embarked upon out of fear. Individuals' reasons for such fear may fall along a continuum, from fear of not belonging (which may seem unworthy of such weighty emotion, but is nevertheless a pressing, foundational human need) to fear for one's life at the hand of violence. That such fear pushes an individual to hide or snuff out a part of one's identity, forces one to kill off qualities offensive to the dominating group's imposed norms, particularly those qualities seen as "weakness," lies at the center of our philosophical and empirical inquiry.

We offer the following brief history of passing's roots not only to situate our empirical work with individuals experiencing blindness and low vision who attempt to "pass" as sighted, but to offer our theorizing of this phenomenon to educators on how systems of oppression such as racism, ableism, and heteronormativity threaten individuals' lives in subtle, deep-seated, and highly consequential ways not immediately apparent. Our empirical research confirms passing is resorted to only out of fear: neither out of bravado nor out of a desire to "overcome" one's disabilities. While oftentimes lauded as admirable or astonishing,<sup>12</sup> when a blind or low-vision individual "passes" as sighted, they/she/he not only act to extinguish some aspect of their humanity, but also to reinforce debilitating, exclusionary, dominating "norms." In order to theorize the phenomenon of blind and low-vision individuals attempting to pass or who succeed at passing as sighted, we here recount the history of racial passing, drilling down to define and historicize disability passing as we consider historical and anecdotal evidence of individuals who are blind or have low-vision who pass as sighted. We do so to aid in educators' understandings that while the many forms disability passing takes might seem wholly separate from racial passing, the two cannot be disentangled, moreover the two together evidence an uneasy yet apt alliance with passing as figurative or literal death.

### **Passing and Ocular Certainty**

The term "passing" and its practice have come to reference one's ability, intended or no, to move at liberty within and through the social world masquerading as a body that satisfies dominating group characteristics even though the one-passing occupies a non-dominating identity and sociocultural characteristics constructed so as to fail to satisfy the norm's parameters—a calculated re-enforcement of hegemonic power. Passing

allows one to move through the world undetected, unpunished,<sup>15</sup> while simultaneously harboring socially constructed identity<sup>14</sup> characteristics that, if detected, would mark the one-passing's body and reveal the one-passing as occupying identity characteristics that those who occupy the dominating group construct as difficult, dangerous, offensive, sub-standard, unclean, frightening, savage, pathological, illegal, or threatening. But passing is not only the work of the one-deceiving, for Brueggemann theorizes "we are always passing together," since humans are collaborative, communal, and interdependent beings, by which she means we all are collaborators and co-conspirators in all forms of passing.<sup>15</sup>

Passing is made possible by the ocular not because it is a passive sense, rather quite the opposite; as Kaschak explains and evidences, vision is a learned skill.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, passing would rarely be possible if sight were merely a passive, received sensory stimuli, but since sight is both learned and acculturated, radically challenging "the taken-for-granted epistemology of sight,"<sup>17</sup> a good deal of passing's ocular magic comes from sociocultural knowledge and influence, not the "folk knowledge"<sup>18</sup> of sight's certainty famously used to tout the empirical truth "seeing is believing." Passing depends on this relation between the physiological mechanism of sight and humans' "perceptual readiness" to recognize or discard informational cues,<sup>19</sup> investing that which is seen with some combination of what Goffman calls "attention" and "disattention,"<sup>20</sup> the latter of which Zerubavel theorizes as the "sociology of denial."<sup>21</sup>

Ignoring something is more than simply failing to notice it. Indeed, it is quite often the result of some pressure...actively [to] disregard it. Such pressure is usually a product of social norms of attention designed to separate what we conventionally consider "noteworthy" from what we come to disregard as mere background "noise."<sup>22</sup>

The ways eyes and brains together "filter and consolidate" reality forms the "meaning structures" that make passing possible. Not only must human society be complicit for passing to "work," so must be human physiology.

Passing also "works" because of humans' intolerance for ambiguity. As Douglas explains, unlike premodern humans who could not help but be tolerant of incoherence, modern humans yearn deeply for rigidity in the form of certainty of meaning: modern humans' cosmologies require mentally "hard lines and clear concepts."<sup>23</sup> So strong is the human's emotional thirst for certainty, and so strong are the modern human's "infatuation with sight" and preoccupation with segregation, that sight becomes "the sense most associated with differentiation and distancing,"<sup>24</sup> so ocular facts too difficult or uncomfortable to acknowledge are disacknowledged and mentally "pushed" into "the comfort of a cleanly classified world."<sup>25</sup> This is the exact mechanism by which passing is practiced and the ocular

certainty of classification overridden. Insofar as complicity in passing is concerned, Kaschak wonders, given the complex physiology of the eye and the ocular/brain function, how can we possibly rely on sight for our truths, “a faculty that leads us astray as often as it guides us...even in its simplest functions? ...[It seems] the arrogance of the human mind, the human eye is rooted firmly in physiology,”<sup>26</sup> defying basic evolutionary understanding, she argues.

### **Racial Passing's Roots**

Passing most often refers to a person of color who is “light enough to pass”<sup>27</sup> (and more recently to gender or ability characteristics), entering the white, dominating world and leaving behind their/her/his community to live among whites as white, a calculated power exchange meant to escape how race-based discrimination “unfairly allocate[s] economic, political, social, and institutional resources along the color line”<sup>28</sup> and a “...commitment that seems to begin with a self but is legitimated only by willfully obscuring most of its boundaries.”<sup>29</sup> However, the boundaries of race are far more permeable<sup>30</sup> than white people like to imagine, revealing the “bankruptcy of the race idea”<sup>31</sup>—its absurdity—and calling into question just what it is the “colour bar”<sup>32</sup> represents, defines, and enforces. The illusion of passing is not simply the decision of the one-passing, but the decision of white individuals (or another dominating group) to accept and even embrace the one-passing as one of their own and therefore deserving of membership and all entitlements due one who belongs. The dominating group is always complicit in successful passing; once one crosses and is “accepted or believed,” the one-passing acquires and is vested with the dominating group’s “higher social status”<sup>33</sup> by virtue of having crossed and transcended a “(real or notional) barrier”<sup>34</sup> designed to enforce “the ways putative racial differences [serve] social and political ends” through “deliberate exploitation, domination, or persecution of one group by another.”<sup>35</sup>

Since sociologist Goffman famously, erroneously construes passing as just another form of “impression management,” and as “emotionally inconsequential for the individual,”<sup>36</sup> it is therefore unsurprising that, in the case of racial passing, “historians...have paid far more attention to what was gained by passing as white than to what was lost by rejecting a [B]lack racial identity,”<sup>37</sup> since the power gained from successfully passing as white is naturally assumed to be the prize. But, the one-passing’s loss of identity culminates in grief over the loss of one’s “embeddedness in a community or a collectivity. [Indeed,] passing reveals that the essence of identifying is not found in an individual’s qualities, but rather in the ways that one recognizes oneself and is recognized as kindred.”<sup>38</sup> Successfully hoodwinking the dominating social group and transiting the dominating power structure cannot make up for the monumental loss of belonging to one’s beloved community—with all its traditions, stories, food, family,

music, and humor—so, once stripped away, the one-passing is left with “an ache for...interconnectedness...and [a] longing”<sup>39</sup> for the life left behind, often permanently. Loss of a shared sociocultural understanding casts the one racially passing into a figurative no-man’s land, stuck on passing’s bridge between an adopted white identity and a past rendered dead: a past to which the one-passing must never again lay claim.

In times of slavery, passing provided a bridge to escape slavery’s unimaginable brutality since “‘a stranger’ would see a white, and presumably free, man” rather than a Negro slave with “legally invisible white ancestors.”<sup>40</sup> Escaping slavery either by means of passing or flight meant risking mortal danger; even slaves’ *desire* for freedom was pathologized by naming the “Black desire for freedom a psychologically aberrant mental illness”: drapetomania.<sup>41</sup> “Passing capitalizes on the absence of reliable evidence of difference,”<sup>42</sup> so a Black individual could therefore trespass<sup>43</sup> onto the white world and thereafter magically be entitled to the power and privilege the white-appearing body or the body cloaked in the mantle of whiteness not only affords but enjoys—startlingly, to this day. Passing thereby disguises one’s socially constructed “natural” or “true” identity for what may either be a permanent crossing or a “brief, situational, or intermittent”<sup>44</sup> crossing into a safer, dominating-class-normative appearance and accompanying power dynamic: a ticket to move freely and act with agency, gaining humanity and shedding the designation “property”<sup>45</sup> as well as the stigma of intellectual inferiority in the bargain. Whether the one-passing can move freely between the former and assumed identity or whether passing proves a one-way enterprise, passing, much like hegemony, “is not a singular performance,”<sup>46</sup> but must be performed again and again and the new identity re-won.<sup>47</sup> “Whatever the rationale, both the process and the discourse of passing interrogate the ontology of identity categories and their construction,”<sup>48</sup> “predicated [as those categories are] on the false promise of the visible as an epistemological guarantee,”<sup>49</sup> whereafter seeing can no longer be considered synonymous with truth, a massive breach in epistemological logic that challenges scientism’s privileging of sight and calls into question how something as fixed as one’s identity is instead revealed to be highly contextualized, an ontological distinction that reveals a failed “politics of optics.”<sup>50</sup> In fact, given how the category “white” is not only manufactured,<sup>51</sup> but subject both to radical change and shifting alliances, some argue “all rac[ial] identity is...the product of passing.”<sup>52</sup>

Racial passing is most often associated with Black individuals coming surreptitiously to enter and dwell within the racial category of what has come to be known as “white.”<sup>53</sup> “Critical to the process and discourse of ‘passing’ in [U.S.] history and in the American cultural imaginary are the status and privileges associated with being white and being male.”<sup>54</sup> Slaves’ passing stems from what is perhaps one of the most insidious outcomes of chattel slavery; “in the sexual exploitation of [B]lack slave

women by white men,” via white slaveholders’ abject rape of Black slaves, “‘whiteness’ was [paradoxically] reproduced from ‘[B]lack’ female bodies,”<sup>55</sup> an unconscionable, unwitting transfer of the “‘inheritance’”<sup>56</sup> of “‘whiteness as property.’”<sup>57</sup> “‘Passing muster’”<sup>58</sup> as white by overcoming the hardened “‘epidermal schema’ of racial difference”<sup>59</sup> means one’s body has met by “‘examination” or “‘inspection” the “‘required standard’”<sup>60</sup> and is thereby allowed to cross the bridge and begin to move through the white world inhabiting a physiologically inherited or chosen alternate identity conjured by “‘cunning,” but created by necessity, a disarming “‘sleight of hand.”<sup>61</sup> During the time one passes, the one-passing’s body is made safe from the scrutiny and threat of harm, however the threat that one’s identity might be revealed as the pathologized, non-dominating “‘other” makes for a life rife with awful tension, since one’s “‘true” identity is never far from being disclosed, revealed, unmasked, and the social, emotional, economic, and legal consequences of passing’s “‘lie” come due. During much of history, for those who passed there was no turning back; “‘to write a history of passing is to write a history of loss.”<sup>62</sup> Once passing’s metaphorical bridge is crossed a person of color experiences the loss of self as a person of color and begins life anew as a “‘white” person.

White hysteria over racial passing is attributable to white individuals fearing the loss of social status, power, and hegemonic rule. When Black individuals pass for white this transgression of the perceived social order “‘threaten[s] the security of white identity, on both a societal and an individual level,”<sup>63</sup> “‘destabiliz[ing] the grounds of privilege founded on racial identity”<sup>64</sup> and dismantling “‘something assumed to be fixed, coherent, and stable...displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty”<sup>65</sup> and rendering racial classification disturbingly arbitrary to those who create and hold fast to the power whiteness grants. A similar social hysteria—and often deadly violence—results as gender- and sexual identity-based passing, when unmasked, triggers swift misogynist backlash; when powerful patriarchy, heteronormativity, and racism at once are challenged, individuals from the dominating group respond with murderous results as three sacred social boundary structures are breached, placing transgendered women of color, for instance, disproportionately in mortal peril, for “‘untraditional acts of passing are about much more than mere disguise. Untraditional acts of passing are about rhetoric—the symbolic social construction and reconstruction of identity within particular situational constraints and social networks.”<sup>66</sup>

Those members of the dominating group who accept the one-passing’s assumed identity give the one-passing freedom to move about unscrutinized, unmolested, unjudged and, by virtue of the dominating group’s complicity, make real the delusion’s all-powerful, false belief. While passing may appear a simple act of stepping away from one identity and leaving that identity behind to assume another, in practice it is instead a

complex set of power moves requiring many parts and players. Sedgwick posits:

...to identify as must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in *identifying with* are... in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal.<sup>67</sup>

For instance, as some queer studies scholars theorize, societal complicity electrifies the lure of the closet: queer bodies pass instead as “straight,” because “straight people want to overlook...difference and choose to ignore signs of a different identity,”<sup>68</sup> making the one-passing’s deceitful passage smooth. Successful passing of all varieties is at least two-sided; passing makes significant demands of both the one-passing and all those acknowledging and upholding the one-passing’s assumed identity. Robinson theorizes passing has another accomplice, making passing three-sided in its complicity. She disrupts “the conventional dyad of passer and dupe with a third term—the *in-group clairvoyant*”<sup>69</sup>—an individual who skillfully “reads” the one-passing’s cultural performance of passing using “an almost intuitive faculty of recognition.”<sup>70</sup> Case in point, Ellison claims that while, “sociologists tell us that thousands of light skinned Negroes become White each year undetected, most Negroes can spot a paper thin ‘White Negro’ every time because those who masquerade missed what [other Black people] were forced to pick up along the way: discipline.”<sup>71</sup> Goffman refers to these knowers as “the wise,” or those individuals who see through the artifice and know the passer’s true identity: “persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic....”<sup>72</sup>

### **Disability Passing**

Moving “beyond bipolar racial terms of [B]lack and white,”<sup>73</sup> forms of disability passing are revealed to be tightly tied to the politics of racial passing even though disability passing does not carry the burden of the U.S.’ terrible history of slavery and its violent, racialized oppression. “Disability passing” most often “refers to the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as ‘normal.’”<sup>74</sup> But disability “passing expresses, reifies, and helps create [and solidify] concepts of normality,”<sup>75</sup> and so actively works against the political project disability-focused identity politics confronts and challenges. For disabled individuals, the decision whether and when to pass is complicated by how the category “disability” subsumes an astonishing array of physiological, emotional, mental, and intellectual variance, whether identity- or physiology-driven. Disability passing can be further complicated by some individuals’ use of assistive technologies since devices may signal deviation from narrow,

socially constructed physiological normalcy and able-ness: this despite the fact so very many bodies require and utilize such assistance, employing everything from eyeglasses to bionic body parts, yet persistent belief in a caste system of physical, emotional, and intellectual functionality and its visible markers nevertheless pervades among much of the dominating, “able” class. Consequently, for those who cannot pass, disability is often used as an excuse to restrict, limiting individuals’ “freedom and independence”<sup>76</sup> and putting those with “social markers of impairment”<sup>77</sup> at greatly increased risk of discrimination and violence.

Claiming and retaining autonomy and agency can be at the heart of disability passing; the challenges of and reasons for passing can be complex. As Goffman evidences, once one is made to feel inferior, that individual can no longer feel any sort of security with the group imposing judgment.<sup>78</sup> Ableist tropes pervade many if not most societies, placing those deemed less-than-able when measured against so-called “scientific” norms at an array of physical, emotional, and economic disadvantage. The appallingly low employment rate of those with physical and mental disabilities, in spite of how well-educated and well-qualified an individual may be, in particular for those individuals with low vision and blindness, can inspire disability passing. For example, Brune reports some blind and low-vision individuals pass because they have “internalized the stigma of disability and its association with pauperism;”<sup>79</sup> in a neoliberal economy never making one’s way economically means never having the means to live independently: a rite of passage to adulthood for many.<sup>80</sup> Even though passing requires of those with a disability identity “sufficient genius to disguise their identity,”<sup>81</sup> and the ingenuity, intelligence, and skill set required to pass regularly attests to the one-passing’s ingenuity, employment numbers show those individuals with disabilities are routinely discounted from the hiring pool, making it no wonder that physically and mentally disabled people go to great lengths to appear “normal” and competent,<sup>82</sup> thereby “masking discreditable identities with more socially acceptable ones through passing.”<sup>83</sup>

Some individuals may attempt disability passing because they do not want to be an object of pity.<sup>84</sup> Others may wish to pass to escape the pernicious, pervasive societal stereotype that those individuals with sensory, physical, or mental disabilities<sup>85</sup> also lack mental capacity, another way disability passing intersects with racial passing. Yet another reason for passing connects to safety and autonomy; disability passing can be necessary in order to avoid appearing physically vulnerable either because such vulnerability can be interpreted as lacking in certain abilities needed in order to be “up to the task” or so as not to have one’s physical vulnerability make one the target of violence, scam, or emotionally abusive taunting. Too, disability passing falls along the lines of socially constructed gender roles. Brune argues that, starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, “independence and financial self-sufficiency became central to the American masculine ideal,”<sup>86</sup>

a trend that only accelerated post-World War II. As a new ideal male body-type emerged—muscular, strong, and intensely threatened by any perceived emasculation—society at large began to place “more pressure on men to live up to masculine ideals that were increasingly antithetical to notions of disability.”<sup>87</sup> All told, powerful, dominating social systems conspire to keep disabled individuals in their place, much as those same systems effectively constrain along racial lines, inspiring both racial and disability passing used to circumnavigate or short-circuit inequitable social systems, opening opportunity to individuals long denied, shortchanged, and harmed by systemic oppression.

### **Passing as Sighted**

Arguably the most difficult—if not altogether unfathomable—performance of disability passing may be when blind and low-vision individuals attempt to pass as sighted, for “passing as sighted is not a casual act or one that depends on simple imitation; it requires deliberation.”<sup>88</sup> In societies relentlessly focused on the visual, societies whose cosmologies rest upon epistemological and ontological ways of knowing and being where truthmaking arises directly from visual observation (and thus who employ the adage “seeing is believing” to epitomize society’s dominating philosophy of science), the power of vision as the predominant source of sensemaking is unparalleled and unchallenged.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, in the general public’s mind, vision’s absence typically registers as the most taboo and difficult-to-accommodate human sensory difference: a bridge too far.

Brune points to modern memoirs by blind individuals who recount experiences of passing as sighted<sup>90</sup> and who detail how they learned to pass either by obfuscation or by learning specific methods for appearing sighted, particularly those methods used to navigate social interactions with sighted individuals. Because “passing capitalizes on the absence of reliable evidence of difference”<sup>91</sup> and because blind individuals cannot rely upon mimicry, they instead must acquire, learn, and utilize highly detailed knowledge,<sup>92</sup> since behavior that enables blind individuals to pass as sighted is only learned through intensive, “deliberate study rather than practicing... merely from habit.”<sup>93</sup> Passing as sighted is first accomplished simply by shedding assistive devices and other objects that “give away” one’s impairment—dark glasses, the long white cane, magnification assistance—and later by implementing diversion tactics: adopting facial expressions of “preoccupation;” walking “fast, purposefully;” and when asked to read text individuals “pat their pockets for reading glasses they do not own. When they make mistakes, they feign absentmindedness.”<sup>94</sup> Finally, in the most highly choreographed, finely rehearsed means of passing as sighted, the one-passing must come to know

...the minutest details of how everyday existence is oriented to the expectation that sight is an ever-present feature of that

existence; it means knowing the customs, habits, and signs of seeing people...knowing how to do things with eyes, and knowing what to do that looks sighted...<sup>95</sup>

...in spite of the fact the one-passing cannot see social cues. This is achieved by learning to “eliminate the ‘blind look,’” not holding one’s head too high or one’s neck too stiffly, and learning seemingly to “look people in the eye,”<sup>96</sup> a Western social cue that epitomizes human connection and communicates attentiveness, understanding, “smartness,”<sup>97</sup> empathy, and trustworthiness.

Unlike those who practice racial passing who cannot return across the bridge they have crossed, those who cannot revert to their previous identity, many individuals passing as sighted anecdotally profess a crossroads event in their effort to conceal visual disability, when the masquerade begins to wear on the one-passing, eventually inspiring the one-passing to shift both their everyday practice and identity politics radically away from passing, instead entering, joining, and embracing blind culture, its community, and its tools.<sup>98</sup> In the process the ones-passing give up what must be a highly stressful as well as physically and emotionally exhausting enterprise, a charade of complicated origins and outcomes. Passing as sighted manifests as a “radical liberatory corporeal politics,”<sup>99</sup> raising the questions of whether and how passing as sighted represents performances of ingenuity,<sup>100</sup> a radical response to the trope non-normative bodies are “the ultimate sign of unsuitability,”<sup>101</sup> or simply young adults’ needs to assert independent identities by “passing as normal?”<sup>102</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As educators we must move sharply away from seeing forms of passing as escaping or overcoming one’s “spoiled identity”<sup>103</sup> or sensory inferiority; neither disability passing nor racial passing can ever be construed as lauded wins. Bruggemann<sup>104</sup> criticizes addressing the societal valorization of “overcoming,” instead insisting educators proactively move away from such valorization as reinforcement of ableist societal norms. A d/Deaf person and pedagogue herself, she makes her undergraduate students aware of and then moves them away from the “narrative normalcy” of telling stories about disability that always end with the “overcoming” of disability and the push toward “inspiration”: an ableist narrative that brings every accomplishment back to one’s disability, minimizing if not obliterating agency.<sup>105</sup> It is awfully tempting to highlight and praise exceptionalism of some wildly unlikely performative behavior such as a blind person passing as sighted. In our larger body of work on this phenomenon we liken these performances of passing to Cobb’s notion of “persons of genius,” but we do not do so in order to elevate the extraordinary. Rather, we do so to show the lengths to which people suffering under multiple systems of oppression will go in order to look “normal,” to convince the world of their belongingness,

and to demonstrate the “rugged individualism” that proves to bystanders that those who resolve to pass have worth. But the concept and value of “rugged individualism” shores up and supports supremacist thinking,<sup>106</sup> blames those who cannot perform so-called normalcy in ways that deny agency, dehumanize, and gaslight, and perpetuates the fear that motivates passing in the first place. It is precisely for these reasons the histories and practices of racial passing and disability passing cannot be disentangled. Ultimately, respect cannot come “in spite of” one’s differences,<sup>107</sup> but radical respect for difference might push back the necessity and allure of passing’s little death.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Oxford University Press, “Pass (v), *intransitive*, II.6.a,” in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://www.oed.com/>
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, “Pass (v), *intransitive*, III.11.a.”
- <sup>3</sup> Carole-Anne Tyler, “Passing: Narcissism, Identity, and Difference,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2 + 3 (1994): 212–247, 212.
- <sup>4</sup> Daniel G. Renfrow, “A Cartography of Passing in Everyday Life,” *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 4 (2004): 485–506.
- <sup>5</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1945) paraphrased in Renfrow, “A Cartography of Passing in Everyday Life,” 488.
- <sup>6</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York, NY and London, UK: Simon & Schuster, 1963).
- <sup>7</sup> Drake and Cayton paraphrased in Renfrow, “A Cartography of Passing in Everyday Life,” 488.
- <sup>8</sup> Amy Robinson, “It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 (1994): 715–736, 715.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Oxford University Press, “Pass (v).”
- <sup>11</sup> Throughout our essay we self-consciously use the term “dominating class” rather than the term “dominant class.” We do so because we want to move away from supremacist thinking and toward description of the power dynamic at work in systems of oppression as well as to acknowledge that many if not most forms of domination require and count upon the complicity of those dominated.

- <sup>12</sup> Tobin Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade,” in *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 96–117.
- <sup>13</sup> Oxford University Press, “Pass (v), VIII.38 v. *intransitive*.”
- <sup>14</sup> Of late in popular nomenclature the controversial, complex term “identity” has strayed from its namesake theoretical term, “identity politics,” to spread far and wide, co-opted by dominating culture and achieving an uncomfortable universality often used to mean, “who I think I am.” When we use the term “identity” within our argument, we refer to the realm of identity politics, which we define as pointed political activity and analysis “founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain [marginalized, oppressed, or underrepresented] social groups...aim[ed at securing] the political freedom of a specific constituency,” and working against dominating, “oppressive characterizations” of a group often founded in inequitable economic structures “with the goal of greater self-determination” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). “What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is [the] demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied.... The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of ‘universal humankind’ on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect ‘in spite of’ one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different.” Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 85, emphasis in original; quoted in Cressida Heyes, “Identity Politics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/>
- <sup>15</sup> Brenda Jo Brueggemann, “On (Always) Passing,” in *Deaf Identities: Exploring New Frontiers*, eds. Irene W. Leigh and Catherine O’Brien (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 336–348, 340. Also see her foundational essay, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, “On (Almost) Passing,” *College English* 59, no. 6 (1997): 647–660.
- <sup>16</sup> Ellyn Kaschak, “The Eye of the Beholder,” in *Sight Unseen: Gender and Race through Blind Eyes* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1–15.
- <sup>17</sup> Asia Friedman, “Toward a Sociology of Perception,” in *Blind to Sameness: Sexpectations and the Social Construction of Male and Female Bodies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 16–32, 19.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>20</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*, paraphrased in Friedman, “Toward a Sociology of Perception,” 23.

- <sup>21</sup> Evtatar Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), quoted in Friedman, “Toward a Sociology of Perception,” 23.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1966), 163, quoted in Friedman, “Toward a Sociology of Perception,” 27.
- <sup>24</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Segmented Worlds and Self* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 120–132, paraphrased in Friedman, “Toward a Sociology of Perception.”
- <sup>25</sup> Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by Which Symbols Are Connected: An Introduction to the Use of Structuralist Analysis in Social Anthropology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), paraphrased in Friedman, “Toward a Sociology of Perception.”
- <sup>26</sup> Kaschak, “The Eye of the Beholder,” 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, “Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire,” *Criticism* 45, no. 4 (2003): 435–452, 435.
- <sup>28</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1709–1791, paraphrased in Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA & London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2014), 12.
- <sup>29</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1990), 62.
- <sup>30</sup> Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 8.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 8–9.
- <sup>32</sup> Elaine N. Katz, “Revisiting the Origins of the Industrial Colour Bar in the Witwatersrand Gold Mining Industry, 1891–1899,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25, no. 1 (1999): 73–97, 73.
- <sup>33</sup> Oxford University Press, “Pass (v), IX.43.d., v. *intransitive*.”
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., “Pass (v), VIII.41., v. *transitive*.”
- <sup>35</sup> Elaine K. Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg (Durham, NC & London, UK: Duke University Press, 1996), 1–18, 6.
- <sup>36</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*, paraphrased in Renfrow, “A Cartography of Passing in Everyday Life.”
- <sup>37</sup> Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 11.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 1.
- <sup>41</sup> Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2006), paraphrased in Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley, “Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework,” *Gender & Society* 33, no. 1 (2019): 19–40, 25, emphasis added.
- <sup>42</sup> Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 4.
- <sup>43</sup> Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” 3.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid. Also see Renfrow, “A Cartography of Passing in Everyday Life.”
- <sup>45</sup> Washington, *Medical Apartheid*.
- <sup>46</sup> Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson, “Introduction,” in *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*, eds. Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), 1–12, 9.
- <sup>47</sup> The definition and practice of hegemony we take from Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from The Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London, UK: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).
- <sup>48</sup> Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” 4.
- <sup>49</sup> Robinson, “It Takes One to Know One,” 716.
- <sup>50</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599; Robinson, “It Takes One to Know One.”
- <sup>51</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2015); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- <sup>52</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1927/1912) quoted in Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” 10.
- <sup>53</sup> Coates, *Between the World and Me*; Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.
- <sup>54</sup> Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” 5.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Oxford University Press, “Pass (v), VII.32, v. *intransitive*.”
- <sup>57</sup> Harris, “Whiteness as Property.”
- <sup>58</sup> Oxford University Press, “Pass (v), VIII.40.a., v. *transitive*.”
- <sup>59</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markmann (New York, NY: Grove, 1967) quoted in Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” 4.

- <sup>60</sup> Oxford University Press, “Pass (v), VIII.40.a., v. *transitive*.”
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*; Oxford University Press, “Pass (v), VII.†36.a., v. *intransitive*.”
- <sup>62</sup> Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, quoted in Karen Grigsby Bates (host), “‘A Chosen Exile’: Black People Passing in White America,” *All Things Considered* (radio program), *Code Switch: Race and Identity Remixed* (program segment), guest interview of Allyson Hobbs (author), aired October 7, 2014, on National Public Radio, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/10/07/354310370/a-chosen-exile-black-people-passing-in-white-america>
- <sup>63</sup> Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” 8.
- <sup>64</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), paraphrased in Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” 8.
- <sup>65</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London, UK: Lawrence, 1990), 43–71, quoted in Ginsberg, “The Politics of Passing,” 8.
- <sup>66</sup> Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible*, 3.
- <sup>67</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 61, emphases in original.
- <sup>68</sup> Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade,” quoted in *Difference and Identity: A Special Issue of Literature and Medicine*, eds. Jonathan M. Metz and Suzanne Poirier (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 1–22, 3, paraphrased in Jeffrey A. Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing in Life, Literature, and Public Discourse,” in *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*, eds. Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), 36–57, 41, emphasis in original.
- <sup>69</sup> Robinson, “It Takes One to Know One,” 716, emphasis in original.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 715.
- <sup>71</sup> Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug,” in *Shadow and Act* (New York, NY, Vintage, 1953), 107–143, 124.
- <sup>72</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*, 28.
- <sup>73</sup> Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible*, 3.
- <sup>74</sup> Brune and Wilson, “Introduction,” 1.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>76</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing,” 38.
- <sup>77</sup> Brune and Wilson, “Introduction,” 1.
- <sup>78</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*, 13.

- <sup>79</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing,” 39.
- <sup>80</sup> Molly Pasley, “Young Adults with Visual Impairments and Driver’s Education: Journeys of Self-Efficacy, Identity, and Transition to Adulthood,” Ph.D. diss. (Illinois State University, 2018).
- <sup>81</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing,” 41.
- <sup>82</sup> Robert Rueda and Hugh Mehan, “Metacognition and Passing”: Strategic Interactions in the Lives of Students with Learning Disabilities,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1986): 145–165.
- <sup>83</sup> Renfrow, “A Cartography of Passing in Everyday Life,” 488.
- <sup>84</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing.”
- <sup>85</sup> We draw throughout our work from disability studies scholars’ characterizations and the U.S. Census Bureau’s three major categories of disability: sensory disability (“conditions that include blindness, deafness, or severe vision or hearing impairment”); physical disability (“conditions that substantially limit one or more basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying”); and mental disability (“because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting 6 months or more, the person [experiences] difficulty learning, remembering, or concentrating”). See U.S. Census Bureau, *How Disability Data Are Collected from “The American Community Survey,”* last revised February 23, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/topics/health/disability/guidance/data-collection-ac.html>
- <sup>86</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing,” 40.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid. In advancing his conclusion Brune draws from a number of cultural history texts, among those: Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1993); Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004); and Tom Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900–1950* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000).
- <sup>88</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing,” 44–45.
- <sup>89</sup> Stacy Otto, “Studying Visual Culture,” in *Handbook of Research in the Social Foundations of Education*, eds. Steven E. Tozer, Bernardo P. Gallegos, Annette M. Henry, Mary Bushnell Greiner, and Paula Groves Price (New York, NY and London, UK: Routledge), 534–545.
- <sup>90</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing,” speaking in reference to these works: Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven,

- CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Georgina Kleege, “The Strange Life and Times of John Howard Griffin,” *Raritan* 26, no. 4 (2007): 96–112; Ryan Knighton, *Cockeyed: A Memoir* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2006); Stephen Kuusisto, *Planet of the Blind* (New York, NY: Delta, 1999); Stephen Kuusisto, *Eavesdropping: A Memoir of Blindness and Listening* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006); Rod Michalko, *The Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1998); and Rod Michalko, *The Difference that Disability Makes* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002).
- <sup>91</sup> Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible*, 4.
- <sup>92</sup> Tanya Titchkosky, *Disability, Self, and Society* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2003).
- <sup>93</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing,” 45.
- <sup>94</sup> Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 70.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>97</sup> Beth Hatt, “Smartness as a Cultural Practice in Schools,” *American Educational Research Journal* 49, no. 3 (2012): 438–460.
- <sup>98</sup> Catherine Hickley, “He Can’t See All the Art, but He’s One of Germany’s Top Dealers,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2JYF36t>; John Howard Griffin, *Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); Kleege, *Sight Unseen*; Kleege, “The Strange Life and Times of John Howard Griffin.”
- <sup>99</sup> Bailey and Mobley, “Work in the Intersections,” 26.
- <sup>100</sup> Brune, “The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing;” Edith Cobb, “The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood [work in progress],” *Dadalus* 88, no. 1 (1959): 537–548; Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 1977).
- <sup>101</sup> Bailey and Mobley, “Work in the Intersections,” 21–22.
- <sup>102</sup> Pasley, “Young Adults with Visual Impairments and Driver’s Education.”
- <sup>103</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*.
- <sup>104</sup> Brenda Jo Brueggemann, “On (Always) Passing,” in *Deaf Identities: Exploring New Frontiers*, eds. Irene W. Leigh and Catherine O’Brien (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 336–348.
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.
- <sup>106</sup> This is an idea that comes from a recent “unconference” presentation by DEIJ consultant and principal of the firm Brevity & Wit, Minal

Bopaiah. She delivered this session on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Justice on 7 July 2021 for the National Federation of Community Broadcasters' membership.

<sup>107</sup> Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, 85.