



Passing

by Tina Gianoulis

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Passing is generally defined as seeking or allowing oneself to be identified with a race, class, or other social group to which one does not genuinely belong. The reasons for passing can be as complex as the social structure, but passing has most often occurred for reasons of economic security, such as increased access to employment or housing; or physical safety, when exposing one's true identity might attract violence; or for the avoidance of stigma.

Passing can be intentional or inadvertent, a momentary event, or even a lifetime's endeavor. The practice may offer advantages for those who can pass convincingly, and sometimes passing is necessary for self-preservation, but the dishonesty of a life lived in masquerade takes a heavy toll. It becomes a barrier to connection with others; and as a denial of the self, it can lead to depression and self-loathing.

In queer culture, passing is a complex and layered issue, involving the oppression of the closet, the complexities of desire, and the need to define oneself. Among those for whom passing is an urgent issue are closeted gay men and lesbians who pass for straight, bisexuals who are often perceived as passing alternately as either straight or gay, and transgender people, who have recently re-defined the usually pejorative word into a positive expression of the ability to be accepted in the larger society in the gender they believe is truly theirs.

Racial, Gender, Religious Passing

For light-skinned African Americans during the times of slavery and the intense periods of racial segregation that followed, passing for white was a survival tool that allowed them to gain education and employment that would have been denied them had they been recognized as "colored" people.

However, this economic advantage exacted a high price. Passing blacks could no longer associate with friends and family, and fear of discovery might also prevent too close an association with white people as well, causing isolation and loneliness. Moreover, at a time and place when racial classification regulated areas as personal as marriage and freedom of association, being exposed as passing could have severe legal as well as social repercussions.

The same was true for the women of earlier centuries who passed for men in order to lead more independent lives, or simply to survive in a world where single women were vulnerable targets. At times of rabid anti-Semitism in Europe and the Americas, many Jewish families also either converted to Christianity or passed as Christian for similar reasons.

Passing by Gay Men and Lesbians

The presumption of heterosexuality in most modern cultures often makes passing as straight the easiest option for gay men and lesbians, at least in casual or public situations. Since all but the most effeminate homosexual or the most "mannish" lesbian can pass, and since heterosexuality is usually assumed, most gay

men and lesbians in fact spend a great deal of their lives passing as straight even when they do not do so intentionally.

In a society so eager to assume straightness that "don't ask, don't tell" becomes public policy, it takes courage and resolve to challenge the presumption of heterosexuality.

Indeed, in many areas of the world, including parts of the United States, heterosexuality is practically compulsory. In particular, the pressure to marry and procreate is often so strong that many gay men and lesbians pass as straight for all their lives, with expressions of homosexuality either rare and shameful episodes or sublimated altogether.

More typically, however, gay men and lesbians who are pressured to pass as straight and to marry heterosexually eventually find it impossible to remain closeted and come out, often leaving behind a spouse who feels betrayed and misled.

"Coming out" in effect forces on society a knowledge it does not want, and punishment can be severe, from personal rejection to gay bashing and, in some societies, even imprisonment. Avoiding this type of pain and violence is a major reason that queer people pass for straight.

However, the secrecy of a closeted, passing life creates another kind of vulnerability—the risk of being "outed." While some closeted queers, such as celebrities, are outed by mainstream media in order to sell sensational stories, many are also exposed by members of the glbtq community, angry at the heterosexual privilege claimed by those who pass or, in the case of politicians or religious figures, angry at the hypocrisy of people who indulge in homosexual activities yet work against equal rights for sexual minorities.

Passing by Bisexuals and by Transgender People

Passing has special complexities for bisexual people, whose sexual identity often places them in uncharted territory between traditional heterosexual society and radical gay culture. Viewed with mistrust by both conservative straights and some gay men and lesbians, bisexuals often feel invisible and may find themselves unintentionally passing as both straight and queer at different times, depending on the assumptions of those around them and the kind of relationship they may be involved in at the moment.

Passing has frequently been viewed as a negative act, involving shame and dishonesty. However, this definition of passing is beginning to change somewhat as transgender people have begun using the word in a more positive, life-affirming sense.

For many transgender people, passing means being able to live and work in the world in the gender with which they identify. Rather than a refuge of necessity, transgender passing becomes an aspiration, and experienced trans people sometimes offer advice in journals and websites on how to pass successfully. Trans people who live so that very few people know their trans identity are said to be "in stealth."

However, even though trans passing has a more positive definition than black/white or gay/straight passing, the trans person who hides his or her trans identity can suffer the same isolation and alienation as others who attempt to pass. The fear of being found out and the separation of the self from one's own kind take a great emotional toll.

In the trans classic *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg's hero Jess Goldberg mourns the outsider status she has among women when she successfully passes as a man among them.

Female-to-Male comic Ian Harvie echoes the same sentiment, "One thing I miss is being recognized in public by my butch sisters."

Conclusion

Heterosexuals often attempt to distinguish the struggle for equal rights by racial minorities from that by sexual minorities by saying that dark-skinned black people were unable to pass to avoid discrimination and that their struggle was therefore more difficult. This argument casts the ability to pass as a viable means of coping with intolerance, in effect placing the onus of discrimination on its victims rather than its perpetrators.

General Colin Powell, for example, when inveighing against allowing gay people to serve openly in the U. S. military, during the 1993 debate that resulted in the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military policy, referred to race as a "benign" characteristic and minimized the significance of affirming a minority sexual identity since it was possible to avoid discrimination simply by passing.

Such arguments betray both an ignorance of history and a misunderstanding of the psychological costs of passing.

One evidence of increased understanding of the psychological costs of passing, of the inauthenticity that such a practice inculcates is that in the 2010 debate on repealing the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff--the same position held by General Powell in 1993--saw the issue in terms of honesty and integrity.

He testified to a Congressional Committee, "I cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy which forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens," he said. "For me, personally, it comes down to integrity--theirs as individuals, ours as an institution."

What Admiral Mullen concluded of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military policy, most glbtq individuals conclude of the practice of passing itself.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.