

On “Passing”

By Guest

Published August 19, 2011

https://www.transadvocate.com/on-passing_n_4081.htm

Abstract

This guest post comes from Dr. Cary Gabriel Costello. Costello describes himself as “an academic and scaler of boundary walls, intersex by birth, female-reared, legally transitioned to male status, and pleased with my trajectory. Come journey with me. I blog about intersex issues at The Intersex Roadshow, and about trans issues” I hate the term [...]

Article

This guest post comes from Dr. Cary Gabriel Costello. Costello describes himself as “an academic and scaler of boundary walls, intersex by birth, female-reared, legally transitioned to male status, and pleased with my trajectory. Come journey with me. I blog about intersex issues at The Intersex Roadshow, and about trans issues”

I hate the term “passing.”

It’s used as a euphemism for death: “All were saddened at his passing.”

I’m told I should be happy about “passing.” When used to refer to trans people, “passing” is defined as being accepted by others as a member of one’s identified sex, on the basis of appearance, mannerism and voice. Ever since my voice changed and my facial hair came in, I’ve been congratulated by others (both cis and trans) for being able to “pass,” despite my height and frame (I’m a mighty 5’2”). I’m told that I “pass pretty well” as a man. It always makes me very uncomfortable.

I’ve listened to so many trans people express huge amounts of anxiety about not being able to “pass,” and I empathize utterly with their fears. People who are obviously trans—especially those who are perceived as “men trying to be women” by the transphobic—often face virulent bigotry. People stop and point and stare when we walk down the street in middle America; adults pull their children away from us; insecure, hypermasculine types jump us; hysterical people call the cops on us when we use a public restroom. In much of the country, people who are obviously trans face being fired from their jobs and often find themselves being treated as criminal suspects by the police. It’s scary stuff, and who would not want to take a pass on that?

But let’s think more about the term “passing.” It’s a term with a weighty history, referring to concealment of one’s marginalized true identity, in order to avoid violence and discrimination. In the U.S., it’s often used in the context of race, as in the case of the fair-skinned Anita Florence Hemmings, who passed as a white woman in order to attend Vassar College in the late 1800s. She’s now celebrated as Vassar’s first African American graduate, but when her “colored blood” was discovered in 1897, five days from her graduation date, it was a great scandal, and the school was outraged at Hemmings’

“deceit,” living in the dormitories amidst unsuspecting white “women of quality.” Hemmings, an excellent student, was given her diploma but sent home in disgrace, her classmates cutting off all social contact.

Hemmings passed as white in order to gain access to privileges unfairly denied to women of color. Sometimes the motive for passing is more urgent--a matter of life or death. Consider the case of Edith Hahn Beer, a young German Jewish women who escaped from a train taking her to a concentration camp, and used the identity papers of an Aryan Christian schoolmate to establish herself as a “respectable” German nurse. She met and married a Nazi soldier, avoided any close friendships for fear of revealing her secret, and survived the war while her family died in the camps.

The actions taken by Anita Hemmings and Edith Hahn Beer to pass as white or as Aryan are totally understandable. But they also illustrate why the idea that trans people should be encouraged to “pass” is highly problematic.

First of all, one passes as something one is not. Hahn Beer was a Jew, and after the fall of Nazi Germany she stopped passing as an Aryan and returned to her name and religion of birth. By this logic, if someone tells me I am “passing” as a man, then I am being framed as “really” a woman. I am being complimented on an excellent deception. Thus the term “passing” undermines the fundamental fact of a trans person’s life: that we transition to our true genders. For many years, I passed as a woman, having been assigned female at birth, and it is only now that I have transitioned to male status that I am displaying my real identity, my truth.

To think of a trans man as a “fake” man is the essence of cissexism. This is why every time I listen to one of the many people I’ve met who are afraid to transition cry, “I can’t--I’ll never be able to pass as a man/woman,” I sigh, because I know that the real battle they face is not their bodily structure, but their internalized cissexism, which tells them they don’t have the right to claim their true gender identities because their bodies trump their inner truth. Cissexism holds that appearance is all, and that trans people who don’t conform to binary sex ideals are fakes, freaks who deserve to be mocked and harassed. As if cis men never looked down at their bodies to find themselves short, or sporting moobs, or sparsely haired. As if cis women were never tall or flat-chested or strong. As if people were never born intersex, like me.

The pressure on trans people to “pass” creates a spectrum of privilege among trans people, depending on how closely our bodies conform to binary gender ideals for our identified genders. This is similar to other dimensions of identity--for example, the way that African Americans still gain privilege from having lighter skin and straighter hair. It’s wrong that an African American born with darker skin is likely to grow up to have an income substantially less than an African American born with lighter skin, and it’s wrong that a trans woman born with a slighter bone structure faces less harassment than a trans woman whose body is taller and stronger-boned. It’s an unfair, common pattern of bias and marginalization. But what makes it truly painful, in my mind, is the way we on the margins internalize it. Consider the term “good hair,” long-critiqued by African Americans, but still employed in the community to refer to hair that is lighter and straighter, which reflects a devaluation of African-looking hair. Among trans people, it’s “passing” that is spoken of in ways that reflect internalized self hatred.

A reader of my blog commented on my last post, “When I first started down this road, I had a support group that I attended every month. It was here that I first saw the dividing line. Outside of the group,

those who 'passed' well socialized exclusively with the others who also 'passed' well. One of my 'friends' was very direct about this. She said that one of us on their own might not draw any attention, but two or more of us in a group will get all of us read. Thusly, she only socialized with the 'passes well' group."

I despair of the dynamic in marginalized groups in which those with somewhat more social privilege try to build themselves up by further marginalizing those with less privilege.

By now you may have come to the conclusion that I think trying to "pass" is evil, but that's not the case. Think again of the historical instances of "passing" that I raised. Hemmings and Hahn Beer protected themselves by "passing." True, they saved only themselves. Today, people tend to look back and cluck that they acted immorally, but I disagree. To save oneself from violence is a moral act. In the Hebrew Talmud it is said, "Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." In passing as an Aryan German, Edith Hahn Beer saved her own life. Anita Hemmings did not face death camps, but she faced brutal treatment, poor schooling, segregation, and a life where she would be expected to work in menial jobs instead of developing their talents. She tried to save herself from this fate by passing for white. We'd find it more uplifting to hear that she risked herself to help her community rather than denying she was a part of it, but we cannot demand self-sacrifice.

A person who saves only himself from a fire and not others is not acting immorally. We can't insist that people be heroes. But a person who walks over others to increase her chances of survival is another matter. And there is an uncomfortable element in Hemmings' story of "passing." After being sent home in disgrace by Vasser, she married the fair-skinned Dr. Andrew Jackson Love, a graduate of the "negro" Meharry Medical College, and they moved to New York, where Dr. Love claimed to have been educated at Harvard Medical School, and where they took up lives as a white couple. They raised their children as white, sending them to prestigious all-white private schools and summer camps. To avoid being "outed," Hemmings refused to have contact with her parents, and when her mother insisted on a single visit to New York to meet her grandchildren, Hemmings made her use the servants' side entrance. And yes, the Hemmings-Love family had black servants, and did not share their secret with them. Perhaps they treated their servants more kindly than did their neighbors--but perhaps they did the opposite, in order to underline their position of racial privilege in the eyes of the members of their white social circle. We don't know. But this issue is important in the lives of people in many marginalized groups, including trans people.

To address the question of whether "passing" is a morally good act, a morally neutral act, or an immoral act, we have to break down the term more carefully and consider its components in context. When people speak of trans people "passing," in fact they may be referring to any one of a series of things. They may mean "this person has made changes to their body and/or dress to reflect their gender identity"-in other words, that the person is gender transitioning or has transitioned. They may mean that the person embodies the binary gender ideal of their identified sex closely. Or they may mean that the person is living a "stealth" life, hiding the fact that they have gender transitioned, as Hahn Beer hid her Jewish status and Hemmings hid her ancestry.

At the center of trans gender ethics is the belief that gender transition is a moral good, because it allows honesty. When we come out, we cease to lie about whom we really are. I think using the term

“passing” to mean “taking steps to reveal one’s true self” to be a very poor choice of terms, but the action itself is good. I’d simply call it “transitioning.”

The second usage of the term “passing,” to mean “how closely a person embodies an iconic, binary, cis sex ideal” is morally neutral. It’s like having blond hair and blue eyes: it conveys a social advantage, but there’s nothing inherently superior (or inferior) about it. By the luck of the genetic draw, some trans women are born slight of form, and some trans men tall and robust, and to hold that against them would be ridiculous. But what is truly immoral is to for anyone to treat a person as inferior because they didn’t win the social privilege lottery, and were born with dark skin, a Jewish nose, or a lot of body hair. What is also unfair is that, to a certain extent, embodying physical ideals is something that can be purchased. The wealthy can afford to sink the price of an average home into plastic surgery, but most of us cannot. Any while people of any background can gain social privilege through plastic surgery, the costs of not being able to afford surgery (or hormones or a new wardrobe) are much higher for trans people, for whom the changes are not merely cosmetic. Not being able to afford medical transition services sets up legal barriers to our transitions, limits our activities (you try swimming in a midwestern public pool as a trans man without having had top surgery), and leaves us at constant risk of physical violence from transphobic individuals who despise our bodies.

Now let’s consider the implications of the third usage of the term “passing,” to mean living a “stealth” existence, in the closet about one’s gender transition. What the term means here is “passing as a cis person.” In the early days of medical transition services, agreeing to hide one’s pretransition past was a requirement of treatment. A person who leads a stealth life is able to avoid stigma and violence, to get a good job, to be accepted into a cis gender social circle. And to want a good, safe life for oneself is perfectly understandable. But just as in the case of passing for white or Aryan, it’s a life of high risks and costs. There’s an ever-present fear of discovery, the loss of ties to one’s communities, and the temptation to bolster one’s privilege by ill-using other trans people.

To assess the morality of living a stealth life and passing as a cis person, context is all-important. Consider the difference between Edith Hahn Beer and . . . the numerous anti-gay politicians and religious leaders who have been caught having secret same-sex relations. Hahn Beer would have been killed if her Jewish status were revealed, while the anti-gay hypocrites have built up their already plentiful social privilege by abusing others like themselves. Obviously, these are extreme cases, one of moral rectitude and one morally despicable. In the U.S., trans people aren’t rounded up to be sent to death camps, and I’ve never heard of a closeted trans person trying to gain political power by running on a platform of anti-trans policies. But for some people, revealing their trans status would put them at immediate serious risk—for example, of physical violence or loss of child custody--and under such circumstances, keeping their gender transitions a secret is not morally wrong. It’s like Anita Hemmings’ choosing to pass as white to attend Vassar. It’s risky, and it doesn’t help other trans people, but it protects important life chances.

The question I wrestle with is how to morally evaluate the decision to live stealth lives by trans people who face more moderate risks. If you are a trans person who by luck of the draw and/or personal resources has a body strangers don’t notice to be trans, and you keep your gender transition a secret, you have access to privileges most trans people don’t. People may draw the analogy to, say, a gay man who has not come out of the closet, but the analogy is off for two reasons. First, the risks today are a

lot higher if one is known to be trans gender than if one is known to be a gay man--there's less social acceptance of trans people, more harassment, and less legal protection. But secondly, any gay man can choose not to reveal his gay status and stay in the closet, while the majority of people who gender transition cannot hide the fact that they are trans. We can decide never to transition, but we can't decide to "go stealth" in our identified genders, just as most African Americans could not decide to pass for white as Hemmings did.

What I return to is the thought of Hemmings refusing to acknowledge her own mother. Passing as white to get into Vassar didn't hurt anyone, it just didn't benefit other African Americans. But living a stealth life often winds up involving stepping on others like oneself to raise one's privilege. I know of too many stealth trans people who would cross the street rather than walk next to someone who is obviously trans. I'm sure there are trans people out there who laugh at transphobic jokes to preserve their secret.

I try not to live a life of judgment. I know I benefit every day from what gets called "passing privilege"-the ability, with my gender presentation going unchallenged, to go get some groceries without people nudging and staring, the ability to walk into a professional meeting and to just have people listen to a presentation I give, rather than treat me like some sort of freak. Personally, even if I could live a stealth existence, I wouldn't, because I'm fortunate enough to have job security and a loving trans spouse and a supportive kid who's old enough that I don't have to worry about her being taken away from me by child protective services because some neighbor places a call complaining that my home environment can't be safe for a child. Given my relative security, I feel a duty to the trans community to be out and open and to educate others. Still, I am grateful that if I bind and dress carefully, on most days, most people don't question my male status, and I can choose to wear a bunch of trans buttons or not. I can choose to reveal grand genderquerry and prance around in a beard and dress at a party--and then I can take off the dress if I choose and walk home in a pair of jeans without fear of harassment. I certainly don't think that people have a responsibility to always be out, in all places, at all times.

But I know that others don't have the privilege I do. Their trans status is always visible, written in their bodies. And it really burns me up to see other trans people with "passing privilege" distance themselves from them, or worse, blame the visibly trans for their victimhood when they are mistreated by transphobes.

I've heard trans people living stealth lives say that there is a split in the trans community between people who just want to get through their transitions and move on to live normal lives as women and men, and people who are too political, and angry, and "into" being trans for the drama of it all. According to this narrative, after one gender transitions, one is no longer trans, but a "real" man or woman, and people who don't live mostly stealth lives are exhibiting some sort of arrested development. Stealth living is presented as a matter of personal maturity, rather than of having the luck and resources to have a body that meets cissexist expectations, and of making the decision to avoid risk by choosing to conceal one's trans status. Thinking all the time about the oppression of trans people is presented as being obsessively political or overly dramatic, rather than the consequence of constantly facing oppression because of how one looks.

I abhor the argument that the suffering of other trans people is irrelevant to a post-transition

person who "passes," because they are no longer trans men or women, but "just" men or women. I agree our genders as trans people are no less real than those of cis people--and I think that dropping the "trans" adjective in fact suggests the opposite. A person who says they're no longer trans is saying that trans people aren't really their identified genders. I am a trans man, just as I am a Jewish man and a queer man. Anyone who says this makes me less of a "real" man is revealing their biases.

I am not passing as a man. I am a man. I do not wish to live a life hiding who I am and how I got here. I empathize with those whose life circumstances are such that they feel they must. But I am deeply pained when privileged trans people marginalize others already suffering because their trans status is visible to others.

Save yourselves, when danger presents itself. But don't step on others to do it.

cross-posted from Trans-Fusion

Suggested citation

Guest. "On "Passing"." TransAdvocate, August 19, 2011. https://www.transadvocate.com/on-passing_n_4081.htm