

1 More About The Course

First we should try to define the term “passing.” Like other English words, it has many meanings — you want to pass this class, you don’t want to pass away, you might pass on the opportunity to be the first one to present a definition in front of a bunch of other students. I don’t get to do that, so I’m going to start with a few of the definitions from Webster, 1913:

“to be moved or transferred from one point to another; to make a transit”

“to change possession, condition, or circumstances; to undergo transition”

“to disappear, to vanish, to depart”

“to be present transitorily”

“To go from one person to another; hence, to be given and taken freely; as, clipped coin will not pass; to obtain general acceptance; to be held or regarded; to circulate; to be current; followed by for before a word denoting value or estimation.”

“To advance through all the steps or stages necessary to validity or effectiveness; to be carried through a body that has power to sanction or reject; to receive legislative sanction; to be enacted”

“To be suffered to go on; to be tolerated”

“To go unheeded or neglected; to proceed without hindrance or opposition”

Now, none of these definitions cover quite what we mean when we talk about passing, but I wanted to put them out here so that we can look at the resonances with different types of passing of each of these definitions. I think the best definition I’ve come up with so far is this: To pass is to convince others that you belong in some classification that they might not think you belonged in if they had a different set of information about you. That is, what people see is your gender presentation and not your birth certificate, your body and not your genetics, what you’re wearing and not what’s in your closet. You can choose what you wear, how you present, and certain things about your body; you cannot choose your birth certificate or genetics ... in most cases.

In U.S. history there are two major uses of the term *passing* that we will be focusing on: “passing as white” to avoid and/or subvert racist oppression, and “passing as male/female” as part of taking on a transsexual or transgender identity. Race passing is generally a means to greater social power or mobility, though we will also see examples where that is not clearly the case. The modern transgender movement is generally not a means to an

individual's greater social power or mobility, though there are ways in which that statement is false that we will examine later. (In brief: People do not change genders to have more power, but being a passing transsexual is often safer or more comfortable than being openly gender-variant.)

Talking about people crossing lines of race, gender, and other categories suggests that maybe these categories are not as rigid as we might think, or that different people might see them different ways. While there's room for disagreement on lots of these issues, for the sake of clarity in communication, I want to re-define a few basic terms that we will be working with in class.

- **Gender** is a role played in society; it is mental, not physical. Whether gender distinctions are based on nature or nurture is beyond the scope of this class, but for an activist perspective on the question, I would recommend reading Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, particularly her essay in *Fear of a Queer Planet*.
- **Sex** is the physical sex of a person, often based on apparent characteristics (genitals) rather than on invisible characteristics (sex chromosomes). This may differ from the definition of sex in scientific contexts, but fits reasonably well with the vernacular; to get a "sex change" does not involve DNA changes.
- **Race** is a social construction. The color of one's skin, one of the bases of race, is affected by genetic composition, but the concept of "race" as it exists in society today is clearly not genetic.

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ES.269 Passing: Flexibility in Race and Gender
Spring 2009

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