

**In (Search of) Passing:
Acts and Narratives at the Limits of Identity and Visibility**

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by

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Abstract

“In (Search of) Passing” incorporates diverse historical and contemporary discourses of passing – including analyses of passing in the context of race, gender, sexuality, and disability – and advocates for the relevance of a theoretical investigation of passing that looks beyond the passing subject or individual, to the level of the social. This study points to a renewed interest in passing in a variety of contexts, and suggests that such a theoretical investigation would be broadly relevant, particularly in the Canadian context. Highlighting the prominent discourses of “identity” and “visibility” in passing acts, narratives, and discourses, this study rejects analyses of passing based in identity politics, in favour of insights generated within queer theory. Initiating an epistemological theorization of passing acts and narratives within the framework of queer theory, this project expands the scope of queer theory as well as previous scholarly inquiry related to passing.

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Introduction

For over a century, poet and performer E. Pauline Johnson has captured the Canadian imagination. Born in 1861, Johnson (also known as Tekahionwake) grew up on the Grand River's Six Nations territory in southwestern Ontario and gained prominence as a nationalist poet, and for her stage performances and recitations. In her creative work, Johnson negotiated the complex politics of her Aboriginal and European heritage. Often critical of the racist, imperialist, and patriarchal politics of her time, she was outspoken regarding her own inclusive vision of Canada. Johnson, born to a Mohawk father and an English-born mother, repeatedly called attention to her "mixed-race" ancestry, which provided "a highly unusual vantage point from which to view the volatile mixture of influences that was to become modern Canada" (Strong-Boag 131). It is likely this unusual vantage point that helps to account for the continued interest in Johnson, and her place in Canadian and literary history.¹ Revisiting Johnson's life through a feminist post-colonial lens, Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson note that:

Throughout her public life Pauline Johnson played with the fundamental question of identity posed by her dual heritage.... The very ambiguity of her person summed up the quandary of living in an imperial world that...was increasingly multicultural and multiracial. Perhaps observers were puzzled not so much that she appeared to cross the racial line at will, moving from Native "Other" to imperial "I" with the change of a dress, but that she made the return voyage. If she could pass as one of the dominant, what then drew her back to the margin? (4)

Referencing the ease with which she crossed the "racial line," Strong-Boag and Gerson link Johnson's refusal to pass permanently as Euro-Canadian (i.e. "white") to other histories of passing, and specifically racial passing. Although Pauline Johnson may not be associated with racial passing in Canadian historiography, its possibility circulates in

¹ For more on Johnson's life and work, see Strong-Boag and Gerson. See also Brant; Gray; Keller; and Strong-Boag.

reference to her life and creative works. Refusing to pass permanently, Johnson negotiated the ambiguity of her appearance and racial identification(s), successfully passing as “white” *and* as “Indian.”

Johnson’s life mirrored the complex and contradictory issues that so often inform acts of passing and passing lives. Like many of the passing subjects I consider here, Johnson returned repeatedly to “the fundamental question of identity,” and negotiated issues of racial “authenticity” through her written work, as well as through the visual medium of her dress and embodied performances of race, gender, and class – both onstage and off (Strong-Boag 131-37).² Linking her to “subsequent Mixed-race generations,” Strong-Boag and Gerson note that Johnson “frequently received the treacherous compliment, ‘You don’t look a bit like that!’” in the face of her ancestral claims (4).³ At the same time that Johnson provides a point of entry for my own investigation of passing, consideration of her here raises further questions about the lack of scholarly inquiry regarding racial passing in Canada. Issues of “authenticity” and “identity” are prevalent in passing narratives of all kinds, as they were for Johnson. However, despite the reality of a mixed-race demographic from the earliest days in Canada, there are few theoretical considerations of racial passing in the Canadian context. In contrast, American culture has a nearly obsessive interest in racial passing; yet both countries have a history of policing race through legal policies and legislation, and they are both racially-stratified cultures. Moreover, the common-sense belief in US culture

² Spivak describes authenticity as “ownness, properness, literalness, trueness” (*Spivak* 94). Often used specifically with reference to race, I understand authenticity more broadly, as it relates to identities. Hall links authenticity to the language of identity, which “contains the notion of the true self, some real self inside there, hiding inside the husks of all the false selves that we present to the rest of the world” (“Old and New” 42-43).

³ For the voices of some of these subsequent generations, see Camper’s Canadian anthology *Miscegenation Blues*, especially the section “But You Don’t Look Like a...” (95-147); also see Campbell’s *Halfbreed*.

that race can be read visually at the level of the body retains currency in Canada as well. For instance, the language of “visible minorities” – defined in Canada’s *Employment Equity Act* as “persons, other than Aboriginal persons, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” – reflects this dominant view.⁴ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to account for such a gap in Canadian scholarship. However, it is clear that the issues that have provided the impetus for my investigation of passing – namely authenticity, identity, and visibility – are highly relevant. I therefore remain convinced that passing is a topic of interest and importance for a broad range of Canadians – as the narratives I consider throughout this thesis demonstrate.

Acts and Narratives of Passing: Beyond Identity and Visibility

We are certainly witnessing a process of boundary-construction and identity negotiation...these debates are part of an ongoing project of delineating the “we” whose rights and freedoms are at stake in the movements. (Gamson 399)

To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone. (Yamada 178)

In her comprehensive analysis of transvestism in Western culture, Marjorie Garber argues that a boundary crossing is indicative of a category crisis – a crisis not at the level of the individual, but at the cultural (17). Following Garber, I advocate for a theoretical analysis of passing that looks beyond the passing subject or individual, to the level of the social. I do not mean to imply that individuals can (or should) be simply eradicated from an examination of passing acts and narratives. However, any theoretical examination that focuses solely on individual acts or subjects ultimately risks replicating the pitfalls

⁴ In this instance, whiteness is rendered the invisible and unspoken norm, while race in general is assumed to exist at the level of spectacle. This definition also works to racialize the Canadian population in opposition to a white/Caucasian standard. In 2007, the United Nation’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination released a report that critiqued, among other things, the use of this phrase in Canada. See “Term ‘Visible Minorities’ May be Discriminatory.” For another critique of this phrase see Bannerji.

traditionally associated with such narrow analyses of passing. Rather, I argue here for a theory of passing that takes into account the social, cultural, and political dynamics that define acts and narratives of passing as such. Shifting the focus from the level of the individual to the social, I incorporate analyses of passing acts, narratives, and discourses. In so doing, I follow Judith Butler who understands acts “to mean both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted” (“Performative Acts” 521). This definition encourages analyses that consider individual (passing) acts as not only reflecting, but also creating meaning/knowledge. In addition to relying on this expanded notion of acts, I incorporate passing narratives, by which I primarily refer to the (semi)autobiographical accounts considered throughout this thesis. At the same time, my analysis of passing narratives does include otherwise biographical accounts and cultural representations of passing subjects/passing lives – real or imagined.⁵ Moreover, in order to better expose the social and cultural meanings attached to passing, I similarly extend my investigation to other discourses of passing, including those relevant discursive “silences” (Foucault 27, 100-02). Following this, I understand acts, narratives, and discourses of passing as interrelated concepts that critique, generate, inform, and respond to the social discourses and institutions that are invested in the maintenance of particular identities and identity-based categories.

⁵ Within this thesis I centre autobiographical and semi-autobiographical accounts of passing lives to a greater degree than external and/or fictional accounts. This is in part a move away from analyses of passing that are primarily literary and/or filmic; it is also an attempt to reduce the “violence” of re-writing passing lives (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 47-75), which I discuss in Chapter 2. However, on the subject of narrative, Judith Butler reminds us that autobiography is itself always partial: “[a]lthough we are compelled to give an account of our various selves, the structural conditions of that account will turn out to make a full such giving impossible” (*Giving an Account* 20).

Acts and narratives of passing often are characterised as primarily concerned with boundaries – and, in particular, the boundaries that maintain categories of “identity.” Through acts of passing, identities simultaneously are revealed and concealed, rendered visible and invisible. Acts and narratives of passing exist at a threshold where social and cultural discourses of identity and visibility intertwine. They call into question a long-standing and insistent cultural truism that categories of identity are real, stable, and definable, and that they can be read at the level of the body: that seeing really is believing. As I hope to demonstrate further, not all acts of passing are identical or even analogous, but they are essentially concerned with problems of identity and visibility.

The social/cultural categorization of identities based on race, gender, ability, and sexuality are all sites where acts and narratives of passing operate, and as Marjorie Garber’s work demonstrates, acts and narratives of passing (or boundary crossing) have long captured the imagination of Western cultures. While the distinction between actual instances of such acts and the cultural obsession with their possibility is sometimes blurred, passing remains a powerful and relevant trope. This project is located at the intersection of several areas that have generated considerable scholarly and popular interest in recent years. For instance, in the US, acts of racial passing have been linked historically to the legacy of slavery, miscegenation, and the Jim Crow laws.⁶ This history has produced a wide range of scholarly interest in racial passing, spanning many decades. The forced assimilation and cultural genocide of Aboriginal and especially Métis people in Canada is arguable a parallel coercive project of passing and erasure. For example, the historical and present impact of residential schools and racist/sexist policies in the *Indian*

⁶ For more on the Jim Crow laws see Wald 10-15, and on miscegenation, see Wald 209 at note 10.

Act indicates a pressing need for scholarly analyses of passing in Canada.⁷ In more recent years, passing assumed different meanings in a variety of contexts. The disability movement has renewed interest in passing, as distinctions between “visible” and “invisible” impairment once again raise the problem of identity in the context of visibility. Conceptually linked to established discourses of visibility within queer theory, including “the closet” and “coming-out,” passing is especially relevant to this growing field. More generally, insights and theoretical frameworks developed by queer theory scholars have found a far-reaching audience and have been adapted increasingly in/to discourses on race, gender, and disability.⁸ Closely related to developments in queer theory, the emergence of passing narratives within transsexual and transgender communities is widespread, and has helped to (re)popularize the issue in “mainstream” culture. This development has, in part, resulted in the renewal of long-standing debates about the degree to which identities are stable, knowable, or authentic.

These debates are particularly relevant to my investigation here given the prominent space that identity occupies within passing discourses. Analyses of passing overwhelmingly rely on the framework of (more or less) coherent and authentic identities and identity-based categories in order to make sense of passing narratives and acts. While this approach allowed for some limited analysis of the inadequacy of a binary identity-based system (i.e. male/female, black/white), it also tends to conceptualize passing

⁷ See Lawrence for a thoughtful consideration of the effects of these continuing legacies (including the designation of “status” and “non-status,” residential schools, and adoption) on “mixed-blood” Native peoples in Canada.

⁸ In fact, early queer theory works are notable for the degree to which they were not restricted to the consideration of sexuality. See for instance Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (both of which I discuss further in Chapter 2) as well as de Lauretis’s “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.” For an explicit consideration of queer theory in the context of race and disability see Barnard and Sherry, respectively.

largely as an individual act. Given my own attempts to understand passing at the level of the social, it is imperative that my analysis not continue to rely on the framework of identities. Thus, while the “problem” of identity remains a key concern within this thesis, following this chapter, I focus on the identification(s) expressed through particular acts and narratives of passing, rather than understanding those acts and narratives as expressive of a particular concrete or authentic identity. Because a key goal of this theoretical work is to trouble the central location of “identity” within passing discourses, I rely on the framework of queer theory. Queer theorists have developed sophisticated and theoretically rigorous responses to the question of “identity.” Moreover, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, queer theory also provides a logical basis for an epistemology of passing, given its conceptual links to existing discourses within that field. Finally, queer theory developed in part from within lesbian and gay movements – which similarly face(d) the challenge of answering to critiques of identity. The historical shifts within these movements from “identity politics” to the challenge of answering queer and other post-structuralist critiques of identity is therefore highly relevant to this examination, and to my own decision to shift analyses of passing from telling the “truth” about identity, to questioning (or queering) it. Moreover, as I also propose to shift analyses of passing from the individual to the social level, it is important to consider the social context of these debates.

Particularly prescient for this examination is the interest in passing within progressive social movements, especially those movements organized primarily around a shared identity. Many equality-seeking movements of late have faced the problem of responding to post-structuralist critiques of “identity” in the face of trying to maintain a

coherent basis for collective organizing. Such “identity politics” often successfully allow equality-seeking groups to increase their social and political visibility – as women, as homosexuals, as people with disabilities, as Aboriginal people – thereby creating a political basis for advancing their political agenda(s) and demanding human rights. In particular, progressive social movements in Canada organized on the basis of shared “identity” rely heavily on the discourse of visibility to stake their claims. However, some of the strategies of political organization dominating the last half of the 20th century are becoming increasingly inadequate and may prove to have been short-sighted. The expected shift in Canadian racial and ethnic demographics in the coming years will continue to illustrate the limitations of identity politics strategies that ultimately are based on the fiction of knowable, authentic, and visible identities. The cracks in this logic are now apparent as narrative and theoretical challenges to such politics surface from within and among various social movements.

In recent decades, equality-seeking groups in Canada have, with some success, fought for state recognition of their right to equal treatment under the law. For example, in the years preceding and following the enshrinement of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, major facets of feminist, Aboriginal, gay liberation, and other social movements petitioned for full legal recognition of their “human” rights, with varying degrees of success.⁹ While the actual substantive merits of this kind of legal recognition –

⁹ People seeking to address human rights violations on the basis of the *Charter* (or similar legislation at the provincial level) must base their claims on one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination under Canadian law – for example race, sex, or disability. The language of “human rights” is thus misleading, as rights are actually claimed on the basis of a specific category of the claimant’s perceived identity, not their “humanity.” In this framework, identities are subject to categorization, and the system is not well equipped to address the ways in which people’s experiences and identifications are considerably more complex. Herman notes that “[l]egal liberalism, upon which human rights laws are premised, thus assumes a series of truths: society is pluralistic, there are majorities and minorities, true democracy necessitates the protection

and the attendant energy and focus required from social/political movements – continues to be debated, it is widely acknowledged that this strategy for the “inclusion” of equality-seeking (or “minority”) groups into Canadian civil society further entrenched the ideology of identity politics, and “the kind of activism that treats... minorities as if they belong to a discrete and clearly bounded constituency” (Rayside 12). While identity-based politics are increasingly predominant, post-colonial and post-structuralist activists and theorists also critique the limited and limiting categories/categorizations used to build social movements and advance rights-based claims.¹⁰ Thus, at the same time that identity politics increasingly became *the* means through which to achieve social visibility and legal recognition, the ideological basis for the organization of these claims came under attack, often from within social movements themselves. Although the insights generated from post-colonial and post-structuralist theories increasingly have been incorporated – albeit unevenly – into progressive social movements and scholarly discourses, identity-based strategies have not been abandoned. However, changing racial and ethnic demographics in Canada will continue to render the language of “minority groups” a misnomer (as it is in the case of the women’s movement).¹¹ More important still is the need for social movements to develop effective strategies for mobilizing their social and political agendas without advancing a representation of themselves that is partial and exclusionary at best. Moreover, the legal framework of human rights and anti-

of minorities from the tyranny of majorities, and true minorities share characteristics that differentiate them from the majority norm” (38). See more generally Herman, 32-53.

¹⁰ For an excellent early example of such “post-colonial” critiques, see Mohanty. In the Canadian context, see Bannerji; Jhappan; and more generally Hier and Bolaria. For a critical analysis of the language of “post-colonial” in academic discourses, see Leggatt. For an overview of such challenges within the lesbian and gay movement see Jagose; Vance; and Gamson.

¹¹ In the 2006 Census, Statistics Canada attributed rising numbers of “visible minorities” to immigration, as well as a rise in numbers of interracial marriages. See “1 in 6 Canadians is a Visible Minority.”

discrimination legislation persists, and continues to reinforce the ideology of clearly discernible “majority” and “minority” identity-based groups. The institutionalization of this framework works to construct and limit the ways that equality-seeking groups, as well as individuals, view themselves and articulate their politics within Canadian civil society.

Towards a Queer Theory of Passing

...a one-hundred-year history of homosexuality has not been a simple forward march toward visibility. Indeed, in the twentieth century, periods of relative openness often have been followed by repressive backlash, and visibility has not automatically or even typically, led to historical progress. Throughout most of this period, and still for many today, invisibility has been not only the norm, but, an absolute necessity as a strategy for survival. (McGarry and Wasserman xvi-xvii)

My investigation of passing picks up at the intersection of queer theory and the problem of identity and visibility. If, as I argue here, passing is – at least in part – a strategy of resistance, it is one that forces a reconsideration of the frameworks that continue to shore up and rely on fixed and stable categories of identity. The recent proliferation of acts, narratives, and discourses of passing within social movements suggest that the identity politics framework fails to account for many people, and that the hard won visibility of some may actually limit the ways in which others are able to express and articulate their experiences.

The lesbian and gay movement in Canada typifies some of the major social movement strategies and pitfalls I briefly gesture to here. From the early days of the lesbian and gay liberation movement in the late 1960s it demonstrated a certain level of unease with identity politics, and the prioritization of the rights framework. Like other movements in Canada and elsewhere, there was neither a broad consensus on these

issues, nor on the direction of the movement itself. Queer theory, with roots in gay liberation movements as well as post-structuralism, emerged as a critical and disparate set of ideas concerned with, among other things, the problem of identity. This growing body of work retains tentative links to both lesbian and gay (or queer) movements, and scholarly inquiry in interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies, sexuality studies, and gender studies. Because queer theory emerged in large part out of the debates I outlined above, it is particularly well suited to my investigation. Some further elaboration on the historical trajectory of the lesbian and gay movement in Canada clarifies the emergence of queer theory, and its role as an alternative to “identity politics,” and further grounds my own investigation of passing within this theoretical and historical framework.

Notwithstanding the degree of importance attached to “sexuality” and/or “sexual orientation” in our cultural and individual psyches, these concepts are relatively new, and have only been circulating in their present form in Canada for about a century (Kinsman 48). Designations such as “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” emerged through discourses of medicine and sexology in only the late nineteenth century, and helped to create the conditions through which people began to identify and conceptualize themselves in terms of an overarching sexual orientation or desire. Previous to this development, the major discourse regulating what we now call “sexuality” was primarily generated through criminal laws that policed and regulated specific acts and behaviours.¹²

Jeffrey Weeks notes that the “emergence of distinctive sexual subcultures and communities is part of a wider process that has marked the twentieth century, that of

¹² For a detailed analysis of these and other developments in the history of sexuality, as well as the discourses and institutions that worked (and still work) to construct it, see Kinsman, esp. 37-61; Weeks; and Katz.

ever-growing social complexity and social differentiation, producing a new pluralism of class, ethnic, racial, and cultural forms as well as a diversity of gender and sexual experiences” (78-79). In Canada, the proliferation of politicized lesbian and gay communities and organizations in the late 1960s formed a significant part of this process (Kinsman 179).¹³ What is striking in the emergence of the lesbian and gay movement in particular is that the concept of sexuality was still a relatively recent development, and the articulation of a homosexual “identity” was, in large part, a deliberate and conscious construction.¹⁴

The articulation of this identity category occurred in part through analogies to other identity-based categorizations, such as race or ethnicity. The lesbian and gay movement overwhelmingly embraced an “ethnic” or “minority group” strategy of demanding rights on the basis of a shared identity, mirroring civil rights and feminist movements. This was a conscious and strategic move aimed at creating a basis for community, and increasing visibility for lesbians and gay men.¹⁵ Identity and visibility were thus prominent – and often interdependent – concepts from the early days of the modern lesbian and gay movement in Canada. The belief that increased social visibility would lead to greater public acceptance of lesbians and gay men, as well as the

¹³ These developments were influenced by the politics and visibility of other emerging social/political movements; changing relations of family and sexuality in the post World War II era; legal struggles over the criminalization of (homo)sexuality; and the post-war “national security” campaigns against queers. For an overview of these and other contexts in the creation of a public lesbian and gay movement, see Kinsman; Rayside; and T. Warner. On the national security campaigns in particular, see a forthcoming book from Kinsman and Gentile.

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that categories and categorizations of “identity” based on race and gender are not also social constructions. It is notable however, that the lesbian and gay movement was fairly explicit about the construction of a homosexual identity, and its role in creating a visible movement.

¹⁵ The pitfalls of this strategy were noted and debated. See for instance Kinsman, 190-93. For a critical analysis of the “minority game” see Popert, who refers to the idea of a homosexual minority as “a social fiction” (139).

acquisition of rights, was well founded. Many gains – as well as many losses – occurred for the lesbian and gay movement in Canada over the past few decades, and it cannot be denied that the social climate is changing. Without diminishing these important ideological and substantive gains, critics of such strategies remain, and the gains have not been equally felt. Often, the “identity” that was advanced seemed limited and exclusionary, and visibility for some came at the expense of the continued invisibility of others.

In a poignant 1975 article in Toronto-based publication *The Body Politic*, Gerald Hannon notes that, “[t]o the extent that you define yourself as gay, you define yourself as invisible. There is no accent, no colour, no shared system of beliefs to make yourself whole and visible” (9). This statement captures both the impetus for a shared group identity, and the absolute necessity of visibility – at the political and personal levels.¹⁶ This insistent desire for visibility helps to clarify why identity politics figure so prominently in lesbian and gay equality-seeking movements. For many queers, this desire has been compounded by the reality that (homo)sexuality is not necessarily a visually perceivable identification. Strategies to combat this sense of social (and individual) invisibility tended to reinforce the idea of a shared homosexual identity. For instance, in the interest of increased public visibility, lesbians and gay men employed the politics of “coming out,” confronting both social isolation and mainstream (mis)perceptions about homosexuality on a number of fronts.¹⁷ However, an increasing number of critiques were

¹⁶ Peifer’s narrative of her struggle to negotiate blindness in the lesbian/gay community underscores how crucial visibility is, both with respect to *being seen* (as lesbian/gay) and *seeing* others in one’s community.

¹⁷ See Gross for an overview of outing campaigns and politics, especially in the US and UK.

levelled against this and other identity-based strategies, a few of which are relevant and worth considering here.

Firstly, in Canada and elsewhere, “gay liberation” movements came under attack for failing to be representative. The “identity” advanced often excluded the experiences of lesbians in general, as well as many gay men who did not identify with that particular version/vision of sexuality or sexual politics. In fact, earlier demands that the movement be more inclusive continue from people who identify as, for instance, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered or transsexual.¹⁸ Secondly, post-structuralist and queer theories that posited the socially constructed nature of (homo)sexuality and identity more generally took root. These perspectives advanced a theoretical position that appeared incompatible with the identity politics strategies that were gaining ground. Despite recognition from some quarters that identity politics had strategic currency, many were unwilling to risk the potential gains of this approach for the apparent undermining tendencies in post-structuralist theories.¹⁹ In addition – and related – to these critiques, questions emerged about whose interests were served through the efforts to increase the visibility of lesbians and gay men. The entire notion that a visible homosexual identity would increase the social acceptance of queers hinged on one critical element: visible queers had to be “acceptable” in order to gain acceptance. As Michael Warner so compellingly argues in *The Trouble with Normal*, the problem with this kind of politics is that instead of questioning the notion of normalcy in order to ask what kind of society we need as

¹⁸ See Jagose for a broad overview of these debates and developments. For the Canadian context, see Kinsman; Rayside; and T. Warner. For a critical analysis of debates specifically related to the “inclusion” of bisexual and transgendered/transsexual people in the lesbian and gay movement, see Gamson. See also Jackson and Persky’s collection *Flaunting It!*, especially Chapter 3 (83-143) to get a sense of how some of this history played out.

¹⁹ See Vance; Jagose; and Weeks. This is a broad depiction of these debates, and many positions were more nuanced. See for instance Kinsman’s discussion of these issues, 190-93.

queers, we ask what kind of queers we need to be in order to be considered “normal” and “acceptable” in this society.²⁰

Warner and others who embrace queer politics insist that the price for this kind of mainstreaming within the lesbian and gay movement is too high. Queer theories/theorists tend to prefer flux and ambiguity to the fiction of fixed and concrete identities. However, rather than imagining queer theory as distinctly opposed to lesbian and gay liberation, it is important to recognize that queer theory grew from within these movements – in which queers of all stripes have played an integral part – and many of the fruitful insights it generates are born out of such histories. Because of these histories, queer theory offers a particularly strong foundation for an investigation concerned with the problem of identity. Ideally, queer theory functions as a tool to strengthen lesbian and gay – and other – social movements by offering perspectives that productively challenge political struggles, rather than undermine them.

Chapter Outline

Throughout this thesis, I consider some of the ways in which acts and narratives of passing have been constructed, negotiated, and circulated. Because of the lack of scholarly analysis on the topic of passing – and especially a lack of sustained theoretical analysis – my own consideration inevitably is limited. In identifying some of the major theoretical and experiential discourses that exist in regards to passing, I lay the groundwork for my own theoretical analysis, and for further and more fully developed theorizations. Throughout this investigation, I continue to point to the central position

²⁰ While Warner is not primarily concerned with visibility, his analysis of the mainstreaming of gay politics and identity is highly relevant here, especially given the role that visibility has occupied as a means and an end within this movement.

occupied by the discourses of identity and visibility within the literature on passing, and develop the basis for a theory of passing that can account for these discourses in a substantive manner. In Chapter 1, I examine the ways in which passing has been addressed within discourses beyond queer theory, with a particular focus on those centred on race and disability. In the context of disability, I explore the recent emergence of experiential narratives of passing and the – often overlapping – discourses of “invisible” disability. This overview highlights the interest in passing narratives within disability communities, while also suggesting that these narratives be read as critiquing the dominant “social model” of disability within disability studies. I then consider discourses of racial passing – arguably the most sustained consideration of passing to date – especially as they occur within US culture. Given the prominence of these discourses, I limit my examination of racial passing to those discourses most relevant here, including a consideration of the role of “authenticity” within discourses of racial passing. I additionally consider analyses of passing that provide a bridge between seemingly distinct discourses (such as those based on race and disability), and point to existing gaps within the literature on passing.

In Chapter 2, I turn my attention to queer theory, examining the ways in which passing has been included – and excluded – within queer theory, while also utilizing the strengths and insights generated by previous queer theorists as a foundation upon which to articulate the relevance of this project. Incorporating the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam, this chapter illustrates the importance of moving beyond an understanding of passing rooted in fixed, stable conceptualizations of identity. I argue here that despite the lack of explicit attention to

passing within queer theory, several of its foundational texts can be used to create a space for queering passing, and make a significant contribution to an epistemological analysis of passing. Building on this foundation in Chapter 3, I outline the beginning of a sustained theory of passing, which incorporates the discourses examined in previous chapters, as well as an expanded epistemological analysis of passing itself. In this chapter, I expand my argument that individual acts and narratives of passing cannot be understood as removed from the social and cultural contexts that construct, generate, and define them. Drawing on three conceptual “pillars” within the discourses examined throughout this thesis, I initiate my own theorization of passing. Ultimately, this thesis provides an overview of the key passing discourses, creates the basis for a queer theory of passing, and initiates my own epistemological theorization based in queer theory. As an initial foray into a dense theoretical topic, this thesis provides a solid foundation for further scholarly inquiry on passing.

Chapter 1

(Dis)ability, Race, and the Discourses of Passing

In this chapter, I outline some of the major discourses of passing outside queer theory. I argue in this thesis that queer theory is an especially fruitful site for my particular investigation of passing; however, this investigation also has been profoundly influenced by considerations and narratives of passing outside the parameters of queer theory. I thus survey some of the major discourses of passing in relation to disability and to race. My emphasis on discourses rooted in these particular fields of study is based on the prominence of passing within them, and the importance of their respective theoretical insights to my own theorization of passing. Future scholarship on this topic would benefit from further integration of these diverse and overlapping discourses; the scope of my own analysis of passing is necessarily limited. Given their centrality to my investigation of passing, I pay particular attention throughout this chapter to discourses of (in)visibility and authenticity. These recurring discourses link my synopsis of race and disability passing to analyses in subsequent chapters. Specifically, consideration of the acts, narratives, and discourses surveyed here provides context for the theoretical framework I develop in the following chapter, and encourages nuanced and comparative analyses in my own theorization of passing in Chapter 3. Moreover, issues that I previously identified as central to identity politics – such as identity, visibility, authenticity, and community – are all at play within the discourses considered here, demonstrating their relevance to this project. Pointing to the substantial interest in passing outside queer theory as well as the gaps within these discourses, this chapter clearly indicates the need for further scholarly explorations of the topic.

Some of the most interesting and dynamic conversations about passing in recent years occurred within the emerging field of disability studies. Situated at the intersection of a number of highly vexing issues within the disability community, these experiential and theoretical considerations of passing potentially reshape this field of inquiry, and generate critical insights and challenges for any future analyses of passing. In this chapter, I consider the recent emergence of disability studies – and in particular the development of a “social model” of disability – as the context within which narratives of passing receive new voice. I also consider the theoretical categories/categorizations of disability, impairment, and illness within disability studies, and the ways in which narratives of passing serve to highlight some of their gaps and shortcomings. Central to these narratives is the issue of visibility, considered through the language of “invisible” and “visible” disabilities, especially in the context of chronic illness. Following this examination, I consider discourses of racial passing, with a particular emphasis on how they have been theorized and conceptualized within US culture with its ongoing legacy of racism and racial classification policies. I also emphasize discourses of racial authenticity – including “realness” and “home” – that are prominent within these narratives. While analyses of racial passing are more widespread and nuanced than the narratives derived from disability studies, there are also notable theoretical overlaps, especially with respect to the issue of (in)visibility, which figures significantly in both literatures. Passing also increasingly figures within a variety of other discourses, some of which I consider here. At the outset of this chapter, I thus consider new trends within passing discourses including those that bridge multiple points of identification and that focus on identifications and experiences that remain inadequately interrogated through the lens of

passing. This section illustrates the advantages of integrating multiple discourses of passing, and raises issues central to the following analyses of passing with respect to disability and race.

Discourses of Passing: Trends and Overlaps

Sometimes I feel like pure hunger and desire, a soul in search of living flesh....I will pass as I see fit and fail to pass when I was really hoping I would and refuse to pass when it serves my purposes. (Dacumos 36)

Within the recent proliferation of passing acts, narratives, and discourses are two major trends. On the one hand, people with diverse perspectives and experiences express a growing interest in passing, and their narratives help to identify the relevance of passing beyond the discourses with which it has been linked historically (i.e. gender and race). The field of disability studies, which I identify here as a prominent literature within which analyses of passing currently occur – is one instance of this expanded interest in passing. Another excellent example of this trend is Mattilda’s anthology *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*. While gender is central to the framework of this collection, the narratives of passing within it are varied, and, in fact, nearly a page of the introduction is dedicated to listing only some of the numerous topics considered.¹ The second – and related – trend in recent analyses of passing reflects and recognizes the need to integrate multiple systems of oppression and points of identification into these discourses. These analyses attempt to account for the relationships between and amongst categories based on sex, gender, race, ability, and desire in their analyses of acts, narratives, and discourses of passing. The collective result of these trends is a renewed

¹ It includes passing narratives of “mixed-race identity, the legacy of slavery, white liberalism, immigration, and sexual liberation,” as well as “academic tokenism, queer racism, rural poverty... accidental passing, SM...radical drag, homohop...the prison industrial complex...the psychiatric industry, international travel, high school, incest...anti-Arab hysteria, cruising, marriage” (Mattilda 12-13).

interest in passing, both within and beyond the discourses with which it is associated historically. Although it is not possible for me to fully account for the impact of these trends, I do wish to consider some of the ways they expand the discourses of passing.

Ellen Samuels and Lisa Walker each consider acts and narratives of passing through multiple discourses, multiple systems of oppression, and multiple points of identification. Samuels's article, "My Body, My Closet" (which I discuss elsewhere in this chapter) and Walker's *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity* exemplify both of the aforementioned trends. Each text articulates a theoretical analysis of passing, and draws heavily on the author's personal experience(s) of passing. In addition, both authors partly anchor their analyses in their individual identification with lesbian-femme style/identity. These texts figure centrally in my own analysis of passing, despite the fact that passing is not the sole/primary focus of either author's work.² However, with respect to passing, each author illustrates some of the spaces where acts and narratives of passing (based on gender, race, desire, and ability) overlap, as well as the instances where they do not. In this thesis, I argue that the concepts of "identity" and "visibility" are central to discourses of passing. Likewise, for Walker,

Looking Like What You Are is driven by the question of what it means to look like a lesbian, and what it means to be a lesbian but not look like one. It interrogates how the visible or marked subject is defined in relation to the subject who "passes." I argue that the passer, as a figure of indeterminacy, destabilizes identities predicated on the visible to reveal how they are constructed. (10)

Texts that account for multiple acts, narratives, and discourses of passing are able both to illustrate the productive overlaps and the discontinuities between various points of identification, which are integral to developing an epistemological analysis on this

² Walker considers the politics of what she terms "looking like what you are" – which is a broader than the issue of passing – and Samuels is primarily concerned with discourses of "coming-out."

subject. For instance, Walker argues that because racial difference “supposedly expresses itself...through skin color [sic], [it] often serves as a touchstone for playing out issues of in/visibility for other identities” (12). Following Walker, *all* theoretical examinations of passing must integrate an explicit analysis of race, and especially of the black/white binary. At the same time, prioritizing the “colour line” in this way risks the erasure of analyses of racial difference that are not (fully) accounted for through this binary representation of race; it also places US cultural constructions of racial difference at the focal point of passing discourses. What is needed is an analysis of passing that integrates Walker’s argument in addition to alternate narratives of racial difference and passing, both within US culture (for instance Asian American and Chicano/a narratives) and beyond it.

By similarly integrating multiple discourses of passing, Samuels incorporates consideration of what she refers to as “the limits of analogy” in her analysis (233-36). For instance, she notes that: “The analogy between coming out as queer and coming out as disabled breaks down as the different meanings and consequences of such acts come into consideration” (241).³ For obvious reasons, it is nearly impossible to generate this kind of insight without integrating multiple discourses of passing. Samuels reminds us that it is crucial to remain cognizant of “the limits of analogy” when interrogating and integrating discourses rooted in different (if interrelated) systems of oppression, as I do throughout

³ Samuels’s article appeared in a special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* which was “the first time that a major academic journal devoted itself to the conjunction of queer and disabled theorizing” (McRuer and Wilkerson 16). The issue is an excellent point of introduction to a burgeoning relationship between queer theory and disability studies. For another thoughtful example, see McRuer’s *Crip Theory*. I believe that these kinds of theoretical developments help to account for – and will continue to encourage – a renewed interest in passing. For instance, in his article, “Overlaps and Contradictions Between Queer Theory and Disability Studies,” Sherry identifies “passing, disclosure, and coming out of the closet” as critical areas of overlap in the two fields (773-75).

this thesis. Moreover, acts and narratives of passing (or the passing subjected) are easily symbolically/metaphorically co-opted such that the social and political aspects of the acts and narratives are minimized. Focusing on acts and narratives of passing primarily for their symbolic value, or for the intrigue assigned to the individual passing subject, erases or renders inconsequential the very real differences between the acts and narratives. In order to understand passing as a social and political project, it is imperative to bear in mind the ways in which these acts and narratives assume meaning through (multiple) social institutions and systems of oppression. In her exhaustive analysis of transvestism in Western culture, Marjorie Garber thus argues that cross-dressing often denotes the “displacement of social anxiety from one category to another” (285). Cross-dressing is therefore often understood primarily as a symbolic act (or strategy). By incorporating multiple modes of oppression into her analysis, Garber avoids depicting passing as a (purely) apolitical and/or symbolic act. Her analysis of acts and narratives of racial passing/transvestism as acts and narratives that also are always gendered allows her to expose acts of passing as “the translation of a mode of oppression and stigmatization into a supple medium for social commentary and aesthetic power” (303).

Recalling the important role of social institutions and systems of oppression in constructing acts of passing, I examine passing discourses within the context of both disability and race. As Walker and Samuels demonstrate, it is essential to bear in mind the continuities and discontinuities between various forms of passing. Their attempts to bridge multiple discourses serve as a reference point for the following analyses, and highlight some of the important overlaps between the discourses of race and disability.

Without equating differently located acts of passing, a consideration of the relationship between the various discourses remains a relevant project.

Visible/Invisible: Imagining Disability, Impairment, and Illness

The reality is that people don't want to see me do things. They want to see me fall on my face. (Jones, "Gee You Don't *Look* Handicapped...")

Somewhere in there, my desire to pass as nondisabled – really to *be* nondisabled – reluctantly let go but at the same time it left its mark. (Clare 134)

Narratives of passing within disability studies share several common themes with other narratives of passing, and at the same time they are also firmly rooted in recent disability-specific discourses and theoretical perspectives. Because disability studies only recently emerged in its own right as a field of scholarly inquiry – and has yet to be adequately integrated into more established disciplines – some broad contextualization may be useful here. Over the last few decades, disability movements and communities – in Canada, the US, and the UK, for instance – relied overwhelmingly on the “social model” of disability as a basis for both political activism and scholarly inquiry. The articulation of a firm definitional distinction between impairment and disability is a key feature of this social model. *Impairment* is located strictly in/on the body and is defined as, “lacking all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body,” while *disability* is conceptualized as a social condition, or the “disadvantage...caused by contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus exclude[s] them from the mainstream of social activities” (Butler and Parr 4).⁴ This model emphasizes the social

⁴ This is drawn from a widely-cited 1976 definition by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAIS), and though limited, remains a useful starting point. The social model of disability is

aspect of disability, and provides the framework for a critical engagement with the social institutions and discourses that create and maintain the category of disability.

While recent disability scholarship engages with a broader range of theoretical perspectives – including feminist, queer, and postmodern challenges – the importance of the social model of disability in recent decades cannot be overstated. In addition to the activist and theoretical developments generated from the social model, it is also notable as a movement away from previous models of disability that worked to define and organize the lives of people with disabilities: namely those based on medicalization and institutionalization.⁵

In the context of passing, there are a few consequences and critiques of the social model of disability – or at least of the ways in which it has been taken up – that are worth considering. The social model emerged as a conscious rejection of previous medical and institutional models, as well as the ideas they espoused: that people with disabilities could be reduced to their “disability” (or impairment); that they were weak, sick, and diseased; that they required ongoing expert/medical supervision and/or institutionalization; and that they were dependent and childlike. Conversely, people with disabilities and their allies argued that they were – or could be – independent (as exemplified in the Independent Living (IL) movement); that they had impairments, but were not sick; that the medical professions and institutions produced the majority of their suffering; and that accommodations were necessary to function within an a society organized around ableist and exclusionary principles. The picture of the “paradigmatic person with a disability”

more expansive than this definition suggests, and should be understood to account for a broad range of both physical and mental impairments, for instance.

⁵ For more on these historical developments and the social model of disability, see Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare; for the Canadian context see Valentine and Vickers.

that emerged through the developing social model is an individual who is “healthy disabled and permanently and predictably impaired” (Wendell, “Unhealthy Disabled” 21). However, as Butler and Parr note, “[i]n fighting to break down the myths of illness and dependence that have plagued disabled people’s lives...the ‘true’ pain and inconvenience that an impairment can cause has been lost” (4). The clear distinction between disability and impairment thus resulted in an understanding of impairment that is narrow, and that emphasizes impairments that are permanent, predictable, and recognizable. Experiences of disablement that are unpredictable, not easily identifiable, and that do not reflect the ideals of health and autonomy remained largely unaccounted for.

Disability narratives of passing are often based on personal experience, and give voice to several inter-related and overlapping experiences of what has been widely termed “invisible disability.”⁶ The narratives also serve more generally as a critique of the ways in which the categories of impairment and disability have been constructed within the imagination of both the disability community and “mainstream” culture(s). Like the language of “invisible disability” itself, these narratives respond to the often unspoken cultural truism that people with disabilities are always already marked by an impairment discernable at the level of the visual; alternatively, according to this logic, if the impairment itself is not immediately visible, it is made so through the presence of a wheelchair, a cane, or a seeing-eye dog, for instance. The construction of people with

⁶ The term “invisible disability” encompasses a wide range of mental and physical impairments that are not immediately discernable through the field of vision, which are also referred to as nonvisible or non-apparent disabilities. As Samuels points out, the language of (in)visibility is also used within disability discourses to discuss *social* visibility (251 at note 1). Despite some potential for confusion, I believe that this linguistic overlap can actually produce a space for thinking about visibility – especially in the context of passing – as both an individual and a social phenomenon.

disabilities as a visually identifiable group profoundly impacts on the ways that people with disabilities are understood and represented culturally, as well as how people with disabilities understand, represent, and experience themselves.⁷ The growing body of literature on invisible disabilities both acknowledges this reality, and seeks to expand this particular construction of disability.

Megan Jones's autobiographical article, "Gee You Don't *Look* Handicapped..." examines her own frustration with invisible impairment in the face of (often hostile) disbelief, including barriers to necessary accommodations:

many people are more comfortable relating to me if they can be absolutely certain that I am who I say I am, a deaf-blind person. And they are not absolutely certain that I am that person until I bump into a wall or shape my hands into what is to them an incomprehensible language. In other words, I must make myself completely alien to these people in order for them to feel that they understand me.

Compounding Jones's experience is the fact that many of the people with whom she interacts have a particular understanding of her impairments that precludes her own lived reality. She attempts to resolve this disparity by carrying a white cane and using a hearing dog in order to make her impairments recognizable, and to thereby legitimize them to those with whom she interacts. Her situation exemplifies the social model's distinction between (physical) impairment and (social) disability, while also challenging cultural (mis)conceptions about disability. The price of invisibility is that the social burden of proof and legitimacy rests squarely on the shoulders of the individual. In a response to Jones, Amanda Hamilton notes a similar burden of proof with respect to her experience

⁷ Davis argues that disability "presents itself to 'normal' people through two main modalities – function and appearance" (11). For Davis, disability is produced in large part through the field of vision as the "body of the disabled person is seen as marked by disability" (12). In this process, the relationship between the person who sees and the person who is seen is highly unequal, and the process is itself violent. See Davis, 11-15, 126-157. Garland-Thomson links "the stare" that people with (visible) disabilities experience to feminist analyses of "the gaze," and argues that staring is "the ritual social enactment of exclusion from an imagined community of the fully human" ("Staring Back" 335).

with a learning disability. In Hamilton's case, this burden is compounded by the fact that her particular impairment – unlike Jones's – is itself the object of considerable disbelief. In the context of the widespread suspicion that surrounds learning disabilities (as well as various mental and physical illnesses), “coming out” as a person with such a disability seldom produces the kind of legitimacy that Jones achieves through the visual coming out processes she describes. Hamilton points to the crux of the matter, noting,

We are in a sense forced to pass, and at the same time assumed to be liars—this is the double bind of hidden disabilities like [learning disabilities]. We “pass” as “normal” students, making sophisticated compensation strategies in order to complete our requirements and research, at which point, when we hit barriers...we aren't disabled enough, thanks to the success of previous compensation efforts. (par. 8)

Like Jones, Hamilton passes as able-bodied insofar as her impairment is not visually identifiable; she also faces additional pressure to pass in the face of the commonly-held belief that her learning disability either does not exist, or is not a legitimate disability (i.e. not “deserving” of accommodation). The “double bind” that Hamilton refers to is a recurring theme within passing narratives of invisible disabilities – and especially those disabilities, impairments, and illnesses that are the subject of ongoing debate.

A growing body of literature within disability studies on the topic of chronic illness engages with issues of (in)visibility and passing. Largely semi-autobiographical and firmly rooted in feminist theories of disability, these narratives help to account for the new emphasis on chronic illness – an issue embraced by feminist disability scholars.⁸

⁸ Disability scholars have recently begun to integrate disability and feminist perspectives, highlighting the impact of the overwhelmingly male-dominated scholarship and organization within the disability movement. Among other things, such scholars are critical of the gendered dimensions of a movement that values independence and autonomy over (inter)dependence, and that compartmentalizes the physical and social aspects of disability. For an overview of feminist perspectives on disability, see Morris; Thomas; Wendell, *The Rejected Body*; and Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability.” For examples of feminist

Applying a feminist analysis to disability, Canadian scholar Susan Wendell notes that women are disproportionately affected by serious chronic illness – an experience erased through the abjection of illness from the social model’s conception of people with disabilities – and argues for sustained consideration of chronic illness in feminist disability scholarship (“Unhealthy Disabled” 17). The terminology of chronic illness – “a permanent and ongoing bio-physical or psychological condition which normally involves therapeutic interventions” (Butler and Parr 8) – generally encompasses a broad range of mind and body states, often with little in common.⁹ The inclusion of chronic illness within the field of disability studies is not a simple matter of broadening previous definitions of impairment and disability; it challenges the terrain of this scholarship at a fundamental level. At the same time that experiential and theoretical narratives of chronic illness seek to generate a (re)consideration of basic tenets of the social model, they also create a space for renewed discussion of issues – like visibility and passing – that have wide-ranging relevance within the field.

Passing, Not Passing: The Perception of Disability

An able body is seemingly preferable to impairment, which often reminds us of our physicality, animality, human frailty and ultimate death. (R. Butler 208)

The loss of community, the anxiety, the self-doubt that inevitably accompany this ambiguous social position and the ambivalent personal state are the enormous cost of declaring disability unacceptable. (Linton 21)

disability considerations of (chronic) illness, see Wendell, “Unhealthy Disabled”; Butler and Parr; Moss; Samuels; Price and Shildrick; and Shildrick and Price.

⁹ Wendell argues for an expansive definition of “chronic” that accounts for recurring but acute illnesses, and notes that many chronic illnesses can also eventually be fatal. See Wendell for a full definitional consideration of illness in the context of disability (“Unhealthy Disabled” 19-21); see also Butler and Parr, who argue for a consideration of illness and impairment alongside theoretical analyses of disability, and offer a nuanced discussion of the theoretical and linguistic politics of integrating these concepts (7-10).

In her article “Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities” – which remains one of the most thorough analyses on the topic – Wendell includes a careful consideration of passing in the context of the invisibility of chronic illness. She touches on the issues raised above by Jones and Hamilton, and her nuanced consideration of the politics of passing and disability is worth quoting at length:

[Passing’s] advantages include avoiding the prejudices and daily acts of discriminating and patronizing behaviour that people with obvious disabilities are subjected to.... Passing is sometimes voluntary, but it can also be involuntary, in that some of us will be perceived as nondisabled unless we draw attention to our disability, and sometimes even after we draw attention to it. The ability to pass makes a person *not* the paradigmatic person with a disability. Whether it makes her/him more acceptable to nondisabled people is unclear; someone who can pass but chooses not to may be seen as soliciting sympathy and special treatment. In either case, our ability to pass means that having our disabilities recognized as genuine is a major issue for unhealthy disabled people. So much depends on that recognition—accommodation of our impairments, inclusion in disability politics, and of course, our moral reputations. ...the trustworthiness of people who claim to be disabled but do not look it is always in question. (29)

The issues that Wendell raises are highly relevant to the acts and narratives of passing considered throughout this thesis. She highlights the disbelief that declarations of chronic illness (or other invisible disabilities) sometimes meet and she indicates that passing – voluntary or otherwise – places three essential elements in her life at stake: access to accommodation; inclusion in disability politics/community; and her “moral reputation.” Access to (political, activist, and/or social) community is a major disincentive for many people to pass; or rather, it is a major incentive for many people to “come out” or self-identify – on the basis of (dis)ability, gender, sexuality, racial or ethnic background. Perhaps it is this link between (activist) communities and self-identification that accounts for the continued representation of passing as a politically regressive strategy. At any rate, access to community is a concern for individuals engaged in acts of passing across a

spectrum of identifications. In a similar way, it is not uncommon for acts of passing to result in attacks to an individual's moral reputation; again, this is the case even when such acts simply constitute an individual's "failure" to self-identify. This is partly because passing is itself, as I argue later, frequently understood as an act of deception. At the same time, in the context of chronic illness, belief may not preclude external assessments of "moral reputation," as people with chronic illnesses battle the perception that they are somehow to blame for their illnesses, or for not preventing or recovering from them (Wendell, "Unhealthy Disabled" 28).¹⁰

The issue that Wendell raises that is of most particular concern to people with (invisible) disabilities is access to accommodation. In the context of a highly ableist society, accommodation is a pressing concern for people whose lived bodily and/or mental reality does not conform to the ideals institutionalized in so many facets of their everyday lives.¹¹ Thus people with invisible disabilities, who pass as nondisabled by default, may also find it necessary to engage in strategies to pass as (visibly) disabled. For some, this project – though arduous and oppressive – may be attainable (recall Megan Jones's use of a white cane), but for others the process is considerably more challenging. Many physical and mental illnesses are notoriously difficult to document or prove, and are not easily rendered visible. Passing as able-bodied may allow an individual to avoid particular acts of prejudice and discrimination; it also subjects them to a range of differently discriminatory attitudes, questions, and requirements – and limits

¹⁰ Of course, the discourse of blame is also all-too-familiar to a range of gender variant people, and people whose sexual preferences are marginalized (i.e. "lifestyle choice").

¹¹ I do not want to reinforce the notion that accommodation is required because of an individual's bodily or mental "difference" from the norm. Rather, accommodation for people with disabilities is generally required as a strategy for coping with institutionalized social and physical exclusion.

their access to community and a range of accommodations. Goffman's work on stigma and disability differentiates between those who are discredited – or those already perceived as different, and the discreditable – those whose difference is not known, but may become known (204-05). Focusing on interactions between those who are “different” by virtue of their disability and the dominant group, Goffman's analysis of the discredited and the discreditable can just as easily be applied to a marginalized group as well. In the case of chronic illness, attempting to identify (or pass) as disabled may involve attending community events, and making friends within the community. Conversely, someone with a chronic illness attempting to pass as able-bodied might downplay any physical manifestations of illness and expend great energy and resources in order to keep up with the rest of the able-bodied community. Both of these acts of passing come at great personal cost, and trouble the easy association of passing and privilege.¹²

But while acts of passing may be undertaken for a range of reasons, the coercive forces of ableism and normalcy that govern these acts should not be ignored or underrated.¹³ Considerable pressure exists to minimize or hide visible signs of impairment in the face of daily acts of “discriminating and patronizing behaviour” (Wendell, “Unhealthy Disabled” 29). Simi Linton speaks of the enormous emotional toll

¹² See Carolyn Gage's “Hidden Disability: A Coming Out Story.” Gage documents the emotional and physical costs associated with passing, including its disruptive impact on personal relationships. She includes in the essay a copy of a coming out letter she sent to her friends entitled, “So You Know a Dyke with CFIDS.” The letter comes replete with a long list of dos and don'ts that is illustrative of the prejudice and isolation that people with chronic illnesses often face in their daily lives (204-11).

¹³ See Davis for a thorough analysis of normalcy as an ableist ideology that produces and maintains the category of disability. He notes that “[t]he concept of a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm.... When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of a norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants” (29).

that these acts of passing take, as the result of external and/or internalized loathing. She further notes that many individuals who resist the pressure to pass and/or to hide or minimize their impairments, may nonetheless be subjected to similar projects by their families or other people in their lives, including invasive medical procedures designed to make them appear “more normal” or having their impairments obscured in family portraits (Linton 19-20). In light of people with visible disabilities’ experience of being seen/being looked at relentlessly, there is a particularly violent aspect to these acts of erasure. What emerges through narratives of passing and disability is a complex set of power relations, and a series of contestations over the power to name, identify, and assign value(s). These narratives indicate that a theoretical analysis of passing would not only be pertinent to the study of disability, but that narratives of passing within disability studies could strengthen such an investigation considerably.

Acts and narratives of passing and disability that trouble supposedly stable categories/categorizations – ability/disability, visible/invisible, dominant/marginal – also suggest their relevance to a *queer* theory of passing. Conceptualized in this way, acts and narratives of passing and disability are closely aligned to the queer framework I outline in the following chapter. For instance, noting that heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are largely coextensive in the cultural imagination, McRuer argues for an integration of radical disability (i.e. “crip”) and queer theory/politics. Although he is not primarily concerned with passing, he does point to the prominence of “visibility” within both queer and crip discourses, arguing that “[v]isibility and invisibility are not, after all, fixed attributes that somehow permanently attach to any identity” (2). Furthermore, many of the issues raised here with respect to passing and disability are equally relevant to the

following consideration of racial passing. Narratives of racial passing are also concerned with (in)visibility and the assumption that “identity” can be read as visibly marked on the body. Moreover, while I have only made preliminary gestures towards the role of ableism in constructing disability and the passing subject, discourses of racial passing continue to inspire sustained considerations of passing in the context of racism and racist systems of oppression. Such analyses demonstrate the inseparability of passing acts and subjects from the social and political contexts that generate them, and point to the need for similarly sustained analyses in the context of disability, for example. Given the sophisticated analyses of “identity” emanating from discourses of racial passing, this topic is of particular importance here.

Racial Passing and the Colour Line

In fact I had always identified myself as black.... But fully comprehending what it meant to be black took a long time. (Piper 239)

The invisibility of the mark of whiteness is exactly the mark of its privilege. (Rottenberg 438)

In contrast to the recent emergence of passing as a topic of inquiry within disability studies, racial discourses of passing boast a long history, particularly in the United States, and the politics of racial passing have been widely discussed by prominent American scholars from W.E.B. Du Bois to Henry Louis Gates Jr. So ingrained is the narrative ideology of racial passing in American culture that the “passing plot” is a widely-recognized literary technique in modernist American writing, and passing texts have (re)emerged lately as a site worthy of renewed critical analysis.¹⁴ In fact, it is probably fair to say that US culture demonstrates a fascination with racial passing that

¹⁴ Far from being an outdated literary genre the appearance of several “millennial passing novels” works to “testify in some of the fiercest debates about the viability of race in this ‘beyond race’ era” (Elam 750).

borders on the obsessive. A majority of the discourses on racial passing in the US tend to focus on the “colour line” between “black” and “white,” rooted in historically and culturally specific laws, policies, and ideologies. Notwithstanding their cultural specificity, these discourses are essential to my analysis insofar as they represent probably the most sustained and nuanced theoretical consideration(s) of passing to date. In addition, they offer carefully situated analyses of passing that attempt to account for multiple systems of oppression. It would be impossible for me to offer a full accounting of the diverse theoretical and narrative considerations on this topic; I therefore outline those developments that are most relevant to my own analysis.

Ostensibly relying on – and sometimes reinforcing – the binary representation of race as black/white, discourses of racial passing repeatedly destabilize uncomplicated racial representations based on this division. Because discourses of racial passing in the US arise out of and are firmly entrenched within a legacy of racist policies and classifications that relied (and continue to rely) on this hierarchical binary representation of “race,” it is impossible for them to ever completely divest themselves of this logic.¹⁵ The long-standing currency of these discourses in the cultural imagination, however, suggests an ongoing uneasiness with the capacity of these categorizations to definitively represent racial identity. Acts and narratives of passing in this context result from and/or seek to expose this sense of unease. As Ginsberg argues, “the spectre of passing derives its power not from the number of instances of passing but as a signification that embodies

¹⁵ Specifically, the historical legacy of the “one-drop rule,” the concept of miscegenation, and the resultant Jim Crow laws are intertwined with these narratives of racial passing. The one-drop rule “designated as ‘black’ any person seen as possessing even a single ‘drop’ of ‘black blood,’ as determined by ancestry extending back...an indeterminate number of generations” (Wald 12). For more on this rule and the Jim Crow laws see Wald 10-15. On miscegenation, see Wald 209 at note 10.

the anxieties and contradictions of a racially stratified society” (8). Thus while the (il)logic of the “one-drop rule” – and other racist/racial categorizations – (re)produces an ideology of white purity, it also simultaneously reveals the impossibility of racial purity, thereby highlighting the continual threat/opportunity of passing.

I argue in the introduction to this thesis that acts and narratives of passing primarily concern themselves with the problems of identity and visibility, both of which are recurring themes in the literature on racial passing. As demonstrated with respect to disability, acts of passing themselves occur mainly through the field of vision; acts and narratives of racial passing are also heavily informed by the cultural logic that asserts an invisible whiteness in contrast to a visibly racialized black Other, who is paradoxically rendered socially invisible.¹⁶ Where whiteness functions as an invisible non-identity, racial difference must be made visible. Acts and narratives of passing have the potential, albeit limited, to disrupt the visual logic of race. As Wald notes, passing is implicated in “challenging and/or upholding racialized hierarchies of spectatorship” (153). In particular, involuntary acts of passing can be especially disruptive of this logic when public statements of identification counter the assumptions made by others on the basis of appearance. For instance, when Toi Derricotte proclaims her identification as black in a group of white women, she creates an opportunity not only to disrupt the (visual) logic of racial categorization, but to destabilize their own belief in (their own) whiteness/racial purity: “I looked around the table; I was laughing. The others were not. They were

¹⁶ See hooks, who notes that “[i]n a white supremacist society, white people can ‘safely’ imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted...over black people accorded them the right to control the black gaze. ...racist white people find it easy to imagine that black people cannot see them if within their desire they do not want to be seen” (340). Walker notes that in America, “the black/white binary has been foundational to the definition of both race and visibility. The racial body *is* the black body [my emphasis]” (12).

worried about how black I was and they should have been worrying about how black *they were*” (qtd. in Samuels 243). Similarly, Adrian Piper in her autobiographical account, “Passing for White, Passing for Black” examines her own experience with a lifetime of voluntary and involuntary racial passing which provides her with unique – and often painfully acquired – insights into attitudes and behaviours within both white and black communities. Piper claims that “the longer a person’s family has lived in this country, the higher the probable percentage of African ancestry that person’s family is likely to have,” going on to note that “the fact of African ancestry among whites ranks up there with incest, murder, and suicide as one of the bitterest and most difficult pills for white Americans to swallow” (250).¹⁷

The racist ideology underpinning the resistance/denial of “white” Americans to their ancestry helps to explain why racial discourses of passing continue to circulate. Thus – as noted in my earlier consideration of passing in the context of invisible disability – while passing is not always (or not only) an attempt to avoid discriminatory attitudes and behaviours and/or gain access to the benefits associated with positions of privilege, it is nearly impossible to imagine passing outside of the fundamentally hierarchical aspect of categorization. What relevance would narratives of racial passing have outside of the economies of racism? Gayle Wald’s consideration of mid-20th century “postpassing narratives” in US black popular culture suggests that this rejection of passing functioned not only to articulate a particular political ideology, but also to indicate the possibility that the “need” for passing was past (119). The fact that passing

¹⁷ The language of racial classification (“black” and “white”) is difficult to negotiate at the best of times, and especially within narratives of passing. As demonstrated in the previous quote, this language collapses in on itself repeatedly in Piper’s article, and – intentionally or otherwise – helps to point out the futility of such classifications, without undermining the basis for strategic identification or cultural criticism.

narratives and acts (real or imagined) have not disappeared suggests otherwise.

Discourses and analyses of racial passing are particularly effective at both exposing the mechanisms through which “race” remains socially and culturally constructed, and incorporating analyses of the power dynamics at play in and through this project of construction. In other words, these critical discourses of passing insist that to argue that “race” is a socially and culturally constructed category is *not* to argue that “race” is a meaningless and politically irrelevant fiction (Elam esp. 751-52). Rather, passing questions the assumption that “identity categories are inherent and unalterable essences,” and “forces reconsideration of the cultural logic that the physical body is the site of identic intelligibility” (Ginsberg 4). Although the critiques of “identity” produced through discourses of racial passing may not be as radically deconstructive as some of those within queer theory (which I discuss in the following chapter), it is useful to consider the overlaps and the distinctions between these two fields.¹⁸ In particular, I want to consider the ways that discourses of authenticity circulate in the context of racial passing, which I turn to in the following section. “Realness” and “home,” two discourses that circulate in reference to racial passing, negotiate the tension between the belief in/desire for an expression of “authentic” racial identification, and the need to emphasize race as socially constructed in the face of essentialist and racist cultural beliefs and institutional policies.

To Be Real: Home/Comings and Goings

There is nothing more important to me than home. (Smith xxi)

¹⁸ Despite its radically deconstructive tendencies, much queer theory has yet to adequately interrogate its own racial politics. For instance, Barnard notes the “continued normalization of whiteness by...queer theorists” (6), and attempts in his own work to “think through the theoretical possibilities of queer theory that can put it at odds with formations that resist racialization” (7).

To be able to blend, that's what realness is. (Corey qtd. in *Paris is Burning*)

Acts, narratives, and discourses of racial passing work to trouble or deconstruct dominant conceptions of stable binary racial categories/categorizations; at the same time, they also rely on and (re)circulate discourses of authenticity. At times counterintuitive, these multiple and contradictory representations of passing also work to animate a productively ambiguous space for analysis. The result is that these acts, narratives, and discourses of passing can never be fully and finally contained and described (as regressive, progressive, racist, assimilationist); instead, they should be approached as “struggles for control over racial representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied experiences” (Wald 6). In the face of this radical unreliability, narratives of racial passing often posit the idea(l) of “home” as a space that can be – but is not always – a sanctuary from both racist ideology and the passing imperative. In her comprehensive examination, *Crossing the Line*, Gayle Wald explores the centrality of “home” in passing texts, drawing on US literature and film, and argues that these passing narratives,

are concerned with elucidating concepts of “home” in relation to social categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. In particular, they represent the struggles of subjects to imagine a “home” that would not demand their subjugation to, or confinement within, the various defining discourses alternatively imposed and wielded by the dominant culture. (51)

According to Wald, “home” is at once an idealized place, free from the violent “defining discourses” of the dominant culture, and the place wherein these discourses can be negotiated and contested.¹⁹ The refusal to pass – or the rejection of passing as a strategic means to combat social inequality – is itself posited as a homecoming of sorts. In this way, “home” is posited as not only a potential site of resistance within a white

¹⁹ Rohy links “home” with an idealized nostalgia, “notions of ‘going back’ to a place of origin on the one hand, and to a historical past on the other” (221).

supremacist society, but actually as the site of race. Passing as/for white is thus conceptualized as leaving home, and leaving race.²⁰ There is a certain appeal to passing narratives that create an ideology of home as an idealized place of origin, one where race (read blackness) exists in a constant state – one that can be escaped from and returned to. But when home is read as the site of (“real” or “authentic”) black experience, I argue that this idealization of home also reproduces the category of blackness as highly racialized and overdetermined in contrast to the (non-racialized and consequently invisible) category of whiteness. Moreover, it ignores the reality that passing (or leaving home) is also an experience through which racial identifications are constituted and constructed.²¹

In discourses of racial passing the idealized concept of home is also mediated through diverse identifications along the lines of class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Home may be a place that provides shelter from the societal pressure to pass as white in a racist society. At the same time, the act of leaving home (passing) or going home (refusing to pass) often exposes a stark reality; as Rohy argues, “both homeland and identity are revealed as retrospectively constructed fantasies” (225). The fantasy of home and of going home stands in contrast to the reality that racial passing occurs not only through racial identifications but also through identifications based on gender, sexuality, and class. The return home, and to race, will also be a return to particular constructions of sexuality, class, and masculinity/femininity. “Home” can thus never fully represent a return to a whole pre-passing racial self. As Wald notes in her analysis of the 1949 film

²⁰ A 1952 article in *Jet* proclaimed, “As race barriers fall, the thousands of Negroes who ‘passed’ to find decent employment ‘return’ to their race” (qtd. in Wald 119).

²¹ Hall argues that “we tend to privilege experience itself, as if Black life is lived experience outside of representation.... Instead, it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are” (“What is this ‘Black’” 261).

Pinky, the passing heroine's return home (and to "race"), "relies on the successful redomestication of black female sexual desire" (106).²² In the context of racial categorization, racial passing is never only about the black/white colour line, but is also a process of articulating race through identifications based on gender, class, and sexuality. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa captures this ambiguous relationship. She labels homophobia "the fear of going home," a phrase that succinctly reflects the longing to return to this idealized place, and what is for many the reality of "the enclosing, encircling, constraining circle of home" (Bidy and Mohanty qtd. in Rohy 223). Underscoring her refusal to abstract race from the politics of gender, ability, and sexuality, Anzaldúa's phrase adds considerable depth to the discourse of "home."²³ Of course, racial passing/leaving home may be represented as an escape from race, but it too is always mediated through articulations of gender, class, and sexuality. Thus, for instance, there is no racial identification that is not also gendered. I argue that "home," insofar as it is a fantasy of an essential experience of race, cannot exist. Passing narratives which explore the desire/need/duty to "return" to race draw on and reproduce the fantasy of "home," while also illuminating its fragility and impossibility.

I want to suggest that the contradictory elements within discourses of racial passing need not be understood as a weakness; rather, I argue that in many instances they result in highly creative contradictions, which inspire increasingly complex and situated analyses of individual acts and narratives of passing. The notion of "realness" in the

²² See Wald more generally for a sustained consideration of the ways in which racial passing is produced through multiple identifications, especially her analysis in Chapter 5 (152-181) of the way that John Howard Griffin's experience of passing for black in his (in)famous autobiographical account *Black Like Me* was constructed and produced through his identification with heterosexual masculinity.

²³ I consider Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La Frontera* more fully in the following chapter. Also see her "Preface: (Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces" for a similarly nuanced description of home (3).

context of drag, for instance, is another excellent example of such contradictions within discourses of racial passing. Quoted at the beginning of this section, drag queen Dorian Corey describes realness as “being able to blend.” Corey, who appeared in Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary film *Paris is Burning*, comments on the legendary New York drag balls and the highly complex articulations of gender, race, and class documented in Livingston’s film. The category of “realness” was a primary performative criterion in the competitive drag circuits. Drawing on Corey’s description, Judith Butler argues that “what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect” (*Bodies* 129). The category of realness judges the performer’s ability to emulate a naturalized articulation of, for instance, white, heterosexual, middle class femininity. In contrast to drag performances that call attention to their own camp or parodic articulation of gender,²⁴ drag performances that demonstrate realness actually function as acts of passing. What is particularly significant about these performances is that they can function simultaneously as acts of passing and as parodic performance. Because they exist within the space of the drag balls – which are explicit about the performative nature of the competition – they are still suggestive of the parody associated with more typical or conventional drag acts. Thus while realness signifies the subject’s ability to pass (outside the space of the balls), it also calls attention to the performative nature of the act. Like the discourse of home(coming), realness is an ambiguous discourse in that it repeatedly evokes and displaces the impulse to understand racial (and otherwise racialized) identifications as authentic or natural.

²⁴ See for example, Taylor and Rupp’s analysis of drag in “Chicks with Dicks, Men in Dresses.”

Furthermore, like passing, realness is primarily concerned with perception, rather than a concrete identification with a specific biological category. In the following chapter, I explore Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and argue that it works to create a theoretical basis for reading passing as a performative act. Butler argues that gender is performative, and thus like drag, is always an imitative rather than original and/or natural. This theoretical perspective helps to re-situate the apparent tensions between reading drag – especially in the context of realness – as *either* parodic *or* passing. At the same time, instances (and theoretical analyses) of racial drag add considerable depth to theories of racial performativity. In particular, there are concrete differences in the cultural opportunities available for identifications based on gender, and based on race. For instance, Catherine Rottenberg notes that the “assumption of whiteness can actually be restated in the following way: identify as black (or else) but aspire to be white” (442). For Rottenberg, this marks a crucial distinction between gender and racial theories of performativity: that while categories of gender and race are both ordered hierarchically with differential access to power (male/female, black/white), in the context of gender, women are not supposed to aspire to *be* male (441-42).²⁵ The cultural ideology that continually produces racialized subjects who are simultaneously coerced to identify as “black” and to aspire to whiteness helps to account for the prominence of acts, narratives, and discourses of specifically *racial* passing. This ideology also helps to account for the tension between constructivist and essentialist impulses within discourses of racial passing (including “home” and “realness”). Moreover, this reality suggests that there are very real and culturally-specific differences between acts of passing that are

²⁵ See Rottenberg more generally for a nuanced discussion of these dynamics in the context of a theoretical analysis of racial passing that incorporates performativity and Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry.

primarily concerned with negotiating categories of race, and those concerned with negotiating categories of gender or disability, for instance.

Questions, Gaps, and Conclusions

Don't say
"you know, if you
hadn't told me
I'd never have known
that you had
black blood"
I'm not flattered
to have passed
(Blankenburg 106)

The recent proliferation of new types of passing discourses, and the expanded analyses taking place in some of the more "traditional" discourses point to the wide-ranging relevance of passing. What is perhaps most interesting in considering the range of the discourses contemplated here is that they comprise the experiential and the theoretical, acts and narratives real and imagined. More important, though, is the growing recognition that there are critical social and political dimensions to passing acts, narratives, and discourses. Increasingly thoughtful and complex personal narratives collectively work to illustrate the fact that individuals continue to face considerable pressure to pass in their daily lives, despite the often uneven and unpredictable nature of the associated benefits of passing. However, the notion that acts of passing are correlated with a simple desire to gain access to privileged status and/or its associated benefits has been fundamentally questioned, as has the (often unspoken) assumption that passing is a conscious, deliberate, and strategic act. Taken together, these developments indicate the need for highly situated analyses of acts and narratives of passing. The social and political dimensions emerge as of crucial concern, and demand assessment on a case by

case basis. At the same time, these discourses confirm passing as widely significant – as a strategy, as a discourse, as a metaphor, and as resistance.

Before turning to discourses of passing within queer theory – the focus of the following chapter – I want to briefly consider acts, narratives, and discourses of *not* passing. Or rather, I want to raise some questions about the silence within discourses of passing on the topic of various experiences of embodiment and identifications. Part of the project of locating passing is identifying those theoretical and experiential spaces from which a consideration of passing has been absent. Recall Walker’s assertion that passing “interrogates how the visible or marked subject is defined in relation to the subject who ‘passes’” (10). According to this logic, the passing subject is always present – if only as a site of possibility – in the construction of the visible/non-passing subject. However, there are sites of (in)visible identification and/or embodiment from which discourses of passing remain largely absent. These moments of silence should encourage us to look further, and to ask about the social and political projects of representing passing in some contexts and not others. For instance, the concept of passing is virtually absent from considerations of age/aging. What does it mean that strategies aimed at “reversing” the signs of aging – including increasingly invasive and radical surgical and non-surgical procedures – escape conceptualization as a form of passing? Rather, these acts and strategies are encouraged and even normalized, especially for women. Plastic surgery facilitates possible acts of passing through bodily modification. However, these modifications are represented and understood in diverse and often divergent ways. What might be revealed through a consideration of (non)surgical interventions with respect to age (and the attendant discourses) alongside considerations of (non)surgical interventions with respect to

sex/gender identifications? What would it mean to consider representations of racial passing as a threat to “white purity” in the context of the oppressive and racist normalization of whiteness as an idealized standard of beauty and bodies? These are questions that I can only gesture to here, and to which I will return throughout this examination. However, without suggesting that passing is necessarily a relevant discourse with respect to *every* instance of identification and embodiment, I do want to suggest that it is necessary to take note of the discursive silences, and to question the social/political investments embedded in the processes/projects that underlie these disparities.

In the following chapter, I create the framework for a queer theorization of passing. Queer theory offers sophisticated alternatives to “identity politics” and other discourses that attempt to confront the “problem” of identity. Increasingly, theorists have insisted that queer theory account for and integrate discourses beyond gender and sexuality, including discourses of race, and disability. Moreover, many of the issues raised in this chapter – especially in reference to identity, visibility, and authenticity – relate to similar discussions occurring within the field of queer theory. I therefore turn to this burgeoning field in order to develop the theoretical scaffolding for my own theorization of passing. Drawing on and interweaving several key texts within queer theory, in the following chapter I demonstrate that the basis for a sustained theoretical approach to passing already exists within queer theory, although it has not been articulated as such. Theorists Gloria Anzaldúa, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Halberstam each supply influential queer theoretical texts that are critical to the project I initiate here. Drawing on those insights most pertinent to passing, I illustrate the theoretically rich terrain of queer theory and its relevance to this thesis. While not

abandoning narrative and experiential accounts of passing, the following chapter emphasizes the potential of a theoretical and epistemological analysis of passing, which I initiate in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

Passing Through Queer Theory

Passing is the sign of the sellout. (Walker 8)

Passing means having to hide your identity in fear, in order to live.
(Feinberg, *Warriors* 89)

...there are no true accounts of “passing lives” but only fictions.
(Halberstam, *Queer Time* 45)

In a pass/fail situation...somebody always gets trampled. (Mattilda 9)

While queer theory offers largely cursory references to passing, the sheer volume of these references is enough to convince me of the relevance of my examination. Gestures towards an epistemological or theoretical understanding of passing have greatly contributed to this project; more significant, however, are the numerous and diverse references to acts and narratives of passing based on lived experience. Notwithstanding my own belief in the relevance of passing for various strands of social theory, I am surprised by the multiple and diverse subject positions and identifications that prompt these acts and narratives. In contrast to the sometimes one-dimensional representations of passing that exist – particularly within queer communities – these acts, narratives, ideologies, and experiences suggest that it is a richly nuanced process/project undertaken in a multitude of contexts with various – and often contradictory – aims and results. Given that theoretical and experiential accounts arise from and inform one another, and are not easily distinguishable, I endeavour to include a range of them throughout this thesis.

Before the post-structuralist turn in theory and politics, narratives – real or imagined – of individuals who passed worked to expose the contingency of the binary

categorizations that made their passings possible. The cultural meanings assigned to such passings varied greatly over time and space, with passing individuals characterized variously as intrepid, as tragic, and as traitorous. Their performative projects have been questioned, praised, blamed, and ridiculed – as transgressive, as progressive, as regressive. There is no one emblematic passing act or narrative. Yet, all passing acts and narratives foundationally constitute contestations over naming and representation. They rely on and dispute/disrupt fixed and coherent conceptions of identity. Like the multiple project(s) of queer, acts and narratives of passing are not easily defined, making queer theory an important starting point for a theoretical consideration of passing. It is my hope that the historical trajectory of thought preceding this queer moment in theory and politics provides the critical framework for an epistemology of passing that can account for these contradictory acts and narratives.

The Queer Passing of Identity Politics

It seems somehow important to have a sexual orientation, and when I meet people who question this I explain it in terms of having a community, a culture and outlook shared with others. (Queen 17)

In my Introduction to this thesis, I outlined a rationale for an understanding of passing rooted in queer theory, and that more specifically moves beyond the “identity politics” prevalent in, for example, lesbian/gay¹ and feminist scholarship and social movements. It is therefore important to include analyses of passing – and related topics – that are grounded not only in queer theory, but that also account for the historical

¹ The designation *lesbian/gay* in reference to scholarship and/or communities herein is meant to function as an alternative to the term *queer* (or GLBT/LGBT/Q). This is partly a historical distinction between scholarship/activism that predates the rise of *queer*, or in some cases refers to contemporary groups/perspectives that might not be aligned with its projects. It is not meant to replicate the exclusion of, for instance, bisexual and trans people and scholarship, but points to their historical erasure.

trajectory within which queer deconstructions of identity arose. The specific articulation of a vast and varied assortment of “identities” – while at times (re)affirming the categories that give meaning to their articulation and working to reify insider/outsider boundaries – ultimately set the stage for a queer critique of such categorizations.² These critiques generally rely on deconstructive approaches to essential and/or oppositionally defined identities (Sullivan 50-51). It is important to note that while queer and identity-based theories/politics may be ideologically opposed on a number of grounds, they both attempt to account for the inadequacy of broad categories (such as “woman” or “lesbian”). However, while a politics based on identity typically addressed this inadequacy with the production of increasingly situated articulations of identity, a queer politics rejects this approach in favour of a more thoroughly radical deconstruction of identity. As previously noted, this ideological disjuncture resulted in long-standing and contentious debates across a range of literatures. Although the language and ideology of *queer* significantly infiltrated these literatures, the debates continue. I advocate a queering of theory that is engaged in an exchange with its critics and discontents; I therefore employ an understanding of queer theory that is active and reflexive, and that is not destructive, but “begin[s] to imagine alternative ways of thinking and living” (Sullivan 51).³

Anzaldúa’s 1987 landmark work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is an early and imaginative foray into what has become a rich theoretical field. While often

² It is crucial that queer scholarship not divest itself of the specificity that is achieved through a “politics of location” (see Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location”). In particular, claims and critiques from previously marginalized subject positions voiced through identity-based politics need to be accounted for in queer scholarship.

³For more on the uses and abuses of queer theory, see Vance; Jagose, esp. 72-126; and Sullivan, 37-56.

overlooked in the lineage of queer theory (Barnard 65), Anzaldúa's meditation on borderlands/border cultures employs the kind of critical deconstruction that now forms a mainstay within queer theory. Her work is both carefully situated – geographically concerned with a particular space along the US-Mexico border and the complex cultures it produces – and broadly relevant, as she notes: “[i]n fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* n.p., Preface). *Borderlands/La Frontera* is particularly germane here for two reasons. First, in refusing to represent identity/identities – including those she takes on – as stable/coherent, Anzaldúa queers the very “communities” she describes. The text of *Borderlands/La Frontera* crosses genres, crosses borders, and crosses language, race, and genders. Its process of queering is highly attuned to relations of power, thus making visible the political project/process of queering. Secondly, Anzaldúa's poetic description of the borderlands works to generate conceptual space for a theory of passing. The border, as it is conceived of by Anzaldúa is a place of liminality – a liminality that is open to movement and interpretation while at the same time subject to strict regulation and patrolling:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” (*Borderlands* 25)

For Anzaldúa, borderland cultures/people are always in transition, they are in-between, and they are outcasts and outsiders. The borderland may be “a vague and undetermined space,” but the border itself is a defining and a determining place. It is amongst these contradictions that acts and narratives of passing occur.

Ian Barnard’s reading of *Borderlands/La Frontera* describes Anzaldúa as engaging in a queer methodology that incorporates an “(anti-)identity formation/dissolution and a series of transferences and switches that pattern the entire text” (68). For instance, her employment of multiple (including “bastardized”) languages, as well as her identification with multiple gendered, racialized, and classed subjectivities resist simple categorization. One of the remarkable aspects of Anzaldúa’s writing in this text is that she incorporates *both* a highly situated and politicized approach to her own subject position(s) *and* a disavowal of any tendency towards a concretization of the identifications she produces. The result is that Barnard can (accurately) *both* describe her work as generative of “a politicized queer identity” *and* note that she “uses ‘queer’ to...make identification queer and to queer identity” (70).⁴ Her methodology highlights the sometimes contradictory fragmentations and proliferations that arise through prioritizing deconstructive projects: *both/and* rather than *either/or*. Anzaldúa’s project is thus associated with queer “critical response[s] to the humanist belief in absolute essences and oppositions” (Sullivan 50). At the same time, because her work is explicitly anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-nationalist, she refuses colonizing appropriations of her work. Despite the “anti-essentialism and alliance building” in her text, the “specific

⁴ On reading Anzaldúa as a queer theorist, see Linda Garber, 147-175. In particular, Garber emphasizes the lesbian-feminist roots of *Borderlands/La Frontera* and queer theory in general. For her response to Barnard, see esp. 167-170.

and political details cannot be analogized or transferred onto a bland white identity” (Barnard 71).

While some of the more universalist queer theory/activism that followed the work of Anzaldúa met with criticism for being “among other things, male-centred, anti-feminist, and race-blind” (Sullivan 48), Anzaldúa’s work indicates that this is not an inevitable consequence of queer challenges to identity.⁵ Because of the historical position of *Borderlands/La Frontera* as well as Anzaldúa’s remarkable queer negotiations of the diverse positionalities traversed within the text, it remains a central text in the evolution of queer theory. Moreover, Anzaldúa’s concept of the borderlands/border cultures offers a particular connection to a theory of passing; it is this more specific application of Anzaldúa’s work to which I turn.

Boundaries and Border(land)s

I feel their silent appraisal down the corridor as I approach them, and as they search my sling bag I listen hard for a “Sir” or “Ma’am” to decide my course of conduct. Beyond the corridor, I know, the line divides, men to the male frisker, women to the female, and so far I have no notion which to take. (Morris qtd. in M. Garber 107)

Passing acts and narratives are often read as primarily concerned with the boundaries or borderlines between categories. The categories that structure these narratives, acts, and their interpretation are generally assumed to be self-evident. Of course, the degree to which these categories and the borders that separate them are actually self-evident is debatable. What is clear is that acts and narratives of passing are

⁵ Anzaldúa also co-edited the historic 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* which challenged the universality of a largely white(-centric) Anglo-American feminism. Alarcón argues that despite the “power of *Bridge* to affect the personal lives of its readers, *Bridge*’s challenge to the Anglo-American subject of feminism” has yet to be fully integrated (406). Her depiction of the writers in this anthology as “aware of the displacement of their subjectivity across a multiplicity of discourses” (Alarcón 404) accurately describes Anzaldúa’s work in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

made intelligible through them; categorizations – even those acknowledged to be constructed (socially or otherwise) – provide the necessary framework in which acts and narratives of passing become meaningful. A critical theory of passing should move beyond a singular focus on borders and boundaries, but it must account for their prominence within the discourses on passing. One of the challenges for a queer account of passing is to avoid (re)presenting these borders/boundaries as stable and/or determining of the acts and narratives made possible. What is needed in this context is an understanding of the ways in which borders have been depicted as constitutive of these acts and narratives. At the same time, following Anzaldúa, I argue for an expanded concept of the *borderland* that moves away from a reifying focus on the *borderline*.

A border or boundary is essentially a line which could, in this case, be described as the site of passing. Passing thus refers to the act of crossing (passing over) the line. As noted, discourses related to passing indicate a preoccupation with this line and its crossing(s); these crossings (or passings) range from the metaphorical, to the consciously performed, to the unwitting. At the same time as this boundary is prominent within depictions/representations of passing, the meanings assigned to it vary greatly. To begin, “the” line or boundary is, in fact, many lines – each contested, and each taking on different significance depending on an individual’s position in relation to it. In *Vested Interests*, Garber understands cross-dressing as a form of boundary crossing: “the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (17). For Garber, the “category crisis” that is figured by representations (and acts) of cross-dressing in Western culture, is not only about the inability of categories to fully explain/define/account for their so-called constituents, but

is about the problem of categorization *per se*. In other words, Garber reads acts and cultural representations of cross-dressing as concerned with “an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity” (17). *Vested Interests* thus mirrors queer theory’s interest in unsettling oppositional definitions and categorizations. It is about boundary, and boundary crossing, while also arguing for an analysis of passing (specifically sartorial passing in this case) that concerns itself with a more radical upsetting of the entire project of categorization.⁶

Garber illustrates that a boundary can function as the site at which contestations of “comfortable binarity” occur. However, the boundary/borderline also works to sort acts and narratives onto one side or the other, and in so doing to define them – often rigidly. Gloria Anzaldúa recalls this disciplinary function of the borderline when she notes that borders “are set up to...distinguish *us* from *them*” (*Borderlands* 25). While the meanings associated with a border/boundary are open to negotiation and contestation, this is ultimately a dangerous project. Anzaldúa’s portrayal of the border as “a narrow strip along a steep edge” (*Borderlands* 25) suggests the plethora of risks associated with border/boundary crossings of all kinds. The borders that demarcate “male” and “female” for example, are not meaningless and crossing them is not without consequence. While queer theorists and other social constructionists rightly insist that these dividing lines are not “natural” or “essential” they retain considerable currency. Anzaldúa suggests that there are physical (geographic) as well as psychological, sexual, and spiritual borders,

⁶It is interesting to note that Garber’s deconstruction of “category itself” is located within her account of cross-dressing or “transvestism” – a sartorial strategy that occupies a contested place within queer theory and lesbian/gay studies. One of the strengths of Garber’s work here is her refusal to understand cross-dressing primarily as a metaphor or signifier; she employs a strategy of looking *at* instances of cross-dressing rather than *through* them. See also Leslie Feinberg for a critique of the use of the term “transvestite” (*Warriors* xi).

and her analysis of the physical US-Mexico border is relevant here. It is crucial to remember that while this border (indeed *all* national and other geographic borders) is not natural or inevitable, this realization does not render it meaningless. To argue (as Anzaldúa does) that a physical border is the product of specific historical events and cultural projects does not necessarily reduce the social, psychic, or institutional power associated with it. Likewise, claims that the boundaries “between” the categories that give meaning to individual and group identification(s) are not essential, natural, or even logical is not to divest them of their regulatory function or their cultural currency. On the other hand, the power circulated through these borders is not total or absolute, but is open to negotiation, albeit in a limited way.

The density of meaning attached to these boundary/borderlines is attested to in Marjorie Garber’s claim that the boundary crossings she traces “will always function as a sign of overdetermination” (16). While a *borderline* may be overdetermined, a *borderland* according to Anzaldúa, “is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.” Her description of the borderland immediately follows her account of the border, thus linking but not collapsing the two concepts. In contrast to the “dividing line” that characterizes the border, the borderland is “in a constant state of transition” and therefore impossible to wholly define (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 25). Anzaldúa’s borderland is a point of entry for a queer concept of passing. It expands the space for thinking about passing acts and narratives without ignoring or minimizing the considerable pressure to conform enacted by the borders and the social institutions that

create and maintain them.⁷ A borderland is a space of transition and in transition; it does not have a clear beginning or end.

Transition therefore extends beyond the individuals engaged in acts and narratives of passing to the spaces that they inhabit. Moreover, as indicated by Anzaldúa, the inhabitants of the borderland are a diverse assortment of beings, including “the queer” and those who pass. They exist at a threshold, negotiating between worlds that change and are changed by their very presence within them. For both Garber and Anzaldúa passing is about borders/boundaries, but it is also an act that shifts the terrain around these very lines. Passing thus generates and occurs within a liminal space. It is this space that allows a queer reading of passing to move beyond a superficial recognition that passing poses a challenge to binary categorizations, towards a more radically deconstructive approach. Individual narratives of passing are similarly entwined with the concept of liminality, demonstrating that acts of passing exist in and create a liminal space where knowledge can be contested. For example, in an article on gender transition and travel, Terre Thaemlitz records an encounter with airport security: “I just silently passed through immigration with no troubles” (181). This passing is both a performative act of self-representation and an event located in time and space. Thamelitz’s act of passing is limited by the (increasingly) highly regulated institutional environment of airport security, and it also shifts the threshold of possibility contained within this particular environment. Understood as a gender(ed) performance, it requires an audience and a response. As I discuss, while an audience – or at least the perception/possibility of

⁷In fact, this pressure is so considerable as to be virtually compulsory, as evidenced in part by the continued popular representations of acts and narratives of passing as isolated instances and/or aberrations. I argue that this representation is not entirely accurate, and that “mainstream” culture produces and normalizes acts and narratives of passing that are by extension not defined as such.

one – is integral to the act of passing, the response itself can be unpredictable. In this instance, passing with “no troubles” meant that immigration security did not identify Thaemlitz’s gender presentation as existing at (or crossing) a threshold or border/boundary.⁸ At the same time that Thaemlitz demonstrates that there is a liminal space in the borderland, this account also calls to mind the risks associated with “the steep edge” of the border(line)s.

Discourses of Authenticity: Coming Out/the Closet

My heart aches now to think about who I was then—a closeted queer woman with white skin privilege who hadn’t done any work around her background or her own internalized racism. (Gutierrez-Mock 231)

When one closet door opens, another closes. (Lehner par. 12)

Passing exists at the intersection of several prominent and conceptually rich tropes within queer theory: coming out; the closet; and (in)visibility. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, (in)visibility plays a central role in the discourses that construct acts of gender and racial passing. The language of (in)visibility also frames several critiques of exclusivity that have arisen within the disability movement in recent years. In queer communities and scholarship, the notion of visibility has been linked specifically with discourses of “the closet” on the one hand and “coming out” on the other. Given their conceptual proximity, a reading of passing within queer theory must necessarily begin by acknowledging the degree to which passing has been constructed – explicitly or otherwise – by these concepts. The challenge in this case is to carve out an ideological space for passing that is not overwhelmed entirely by these discourses. It will therefore

⁸ In fact, despite the obvious fixation with borders entailed by such an occupation, the immigration official interviewed informally by Thaemlitz at this time denied ever having “seen or noticed transgendered people” (182).

come as no surprise that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* provides the theoretical landscape on which this examination rests. Two of Sedgwick's claims in particular demonstrate the way that passing has been erased from the language of these discourses; at the same time Sedgwick's work helps provide a theoretical space within which to build an argument about its relevance:

To alienate conclusively, *definitionally*, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure. In this century, in which sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge, it may represent the most intimate violence possible. (*Epistemology* 26)

Acts and narratives of passing are ultimately gestures towards self-definition and/or self-representation. They are the strategic means of resisting the often violent imposition of external definition. While Sedgwick's privileging of sexual desire in this instance reflects her thesis on the centrality of the homo/hetero definition to recent Western culture, the "consequential seizure" she notes here is by no means limited to this particular site of "identity and knowledge." I argue that passing cannot be understood solely as an act informed by individual choice. The process/project of passing does not occur exclusively at the level of the individual, but also – perhaps even primarily – at the social. However, if passing is at least partly a project/process of self-definition and representation, it is by no means a simple or predictable one. The psychic importance that Sedgwick assigns to the ability to "describe and name" oneself is foundational to my own understanding of acts and narratives of passing. It is this urgency that creates the context for a theory of passing that seeks to move beyond analyses of passing that narrowly focus condemnation or approval on the individual act(or)s. The power to name one's own desire, and to otherwise define oneself is not a purely semantic/linguistic issue. When

Carole A. Queen notes that, “[i]t seems somehow important to have a sexual orientation” (17), this is not in reality a claim about *having* a sexual orientation, but rather of *naming* it. She continues, “I want to be able to express the truths of my life, and my sexuality, in a language that does not obscure. The word choices available to me now restrict me.... I want some place to belong, a name to be called” (17). Likewise, resistance to the language of *queer* should be partly understood within this context. Lesbian and gay communities are all too aware of the authority located within the naming and describing of their own desire(s).⁹

The second of Sedgwick’s claims that I wish to consider is concerned more explicitly with the tropes of the closet and coming out:

“Closetedness” itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. The speech acts that coming out, in turn, can comprise are as strangely specific. And they may have nothing to do with the acquisition of new information.
(*Epistemology* 3)

In Sedgwick’s depiction of them, closetedness and coming out exist in an almost oppositional relationship, with coming out constructed through a series of speech acts, and closetedness constructed through a series of silences. Indeed, the concepts are so entirely intertwined that the act of coming out is prefigured by a period of closetedness in popular representations. Because coming out means coming out *of the closet*, the two tropes require each other in order to be meaningful. To be “in” the closet is not to be “out” of it. Consequently, coming out is represented as the transition from silence(s) to speech (acts). At the same time, Sedgwick notes, few people are ever wholly “in” or

⁹ For an example of the ways in which debates over the politics of *queer* are also disputes over the power to name, see Gamson’s analysis of heated exchanges within lesbian/gay communities in the early 90s.

“out” of the closet: “there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them” (*Epistemology* 67-68). Coming out is thus a complex project, despite the fact that it is often represented as a fairly straightforward act. Moreover, even an individual who adopts a strategy of being militantly and insistently “out” in all facets of life, “deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn’t know whether they know or not” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 68). Thus while the closet appears to be a clear and distinctive space, coming out is, on the other hand, an always incomplete process.

For Sedgwick, the closet is a performative place, and thus not a fixed space that can entirely contain someone. By (re)conceptualizing the closet/coming out as a borderland (i.e. in a constant state of transition), being “out of” or “in” the closet is reconfigured as a state that is always being approached (rather than realized or accomplished). Like passing, closetedness and coming out should be understood as perpetual processes or projects. It is within the transitional space(s) between Sedgwick’s twin notions of closetedness and coming out that acts of passing occur. In fact, acts and narratives that work towards self-representation relative to the closet – whether “out” or “in” – could themselves be construed as passing acts. They rely on multiple speech acts and multiple silences in their enactment, and as such they are not easily contained. I would like to suggest that discourses generated by and around “the closet” and “coming out” have worked to preclude meaningful conversations about passing within queer theory/activism. I do not mean that the discourses of the closet/coming out should be collapsed into a discourse about passing; however, a theory of passing could help to

illustrate the ways in which discourses and projects of closetedness/coming out have functioned to erase their own complexity, and consequently to erase the importance of passing. Because Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* so thoroughly opens the closet up to interrogation, and in so doing shatters our cultural perceptions that the closet exists as a fully bounded space that can be figuratively and/or psychologically exited (or entered), I cannot overstate its importance for this analysis.

The speech act that constitutes coming out (of the closet) takes on different meanings in different contexts, and should not be thought to have a simple or predictable outcome. In fact, the very same act of speech can be met with such a variety of responses (or lack thereof) that it cannot possibly have only one meaning. Consider the act of speaking "I am a lesbian": in the context of a socially/institutionally constituted unknowing of the possibility of same-sex desire this assertion speaks back to power by making itself visible/intelligible; in the context of those friends and family who insist they "already/always knew" there is a struggle over the terms of a lived history; in the context of those who reject the assertion altogether (from "you're not" to "it's a phase" to "there's no such thing as a lesbian") the struggle is definitional. As Sedgwick recognizes, coming out is intimately linked to the power of naming. In as much as coming out of the closet is often portrayed as a liberatory practice at the individual and social level – as evidenced by National Coming Out Day for example – it tends to oversimplify the ways in which people actually experience their sexual desires and/or gender identifications.¹⁰

¹⁰ I believe that "coming out" can be a strategic political tool. However, I would like to suggest that the privileged space that coming out has occupied in lesbian/gay and queer communities does not fully account for the ways in which queer-identified people are differently positioned, and the reality that the impact of coming out has very uneven consequences in the lives of individuals. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) calls coming out "one of the most important things you can do to help in the struggle for GLBT equality,"

Trans Theories and the True Self

We always told you that, although we were butch, we really didn't want to be men. Butch was not synonymous with male, we promised. Butches might look very masculine, but in reality we were butch women. There was, in fact, nothing male about us. Guess what? Right again. We lied. (Brown 414)

Bearing in mind Sedgwick's conception of closetedness/coming out, I want to turn to an analysis that is more overtly concerned with passing. The recent increase in transgender(ed) scholarship, as well as the representational upsurge of transfolk within "mainstream" popular culture, has (re)inserted the topic of passing and considerably expanded the discourses related to it. As I suggest, coming out practices tend to oversimplify many people's actual lived experiences and the way(s) they make sense of them. Samuels, who argues that a more thorough understanding of passing is central to visibility politics, notes that "coming out is generally valorized while passing is seen as assimilationist" (244). Moreover, coming out as a strategy for liberation has been limited by tendencies to advance a particular understanding of what (and who) the lesbian/gay – and more recently queer – community is. For instance, notwithstanding lesbian/gay communities' long-standing use of coming out as a strategy to increase social and political visibility, some factions have demonstrated considerable resentment towards the coming out of bisexual- and trans-identified people within these communities.¹¹ Inserting the issue of passing into this context helps to explain how even discourses and acts of coming out can also be limited and disempowering.

but attempts to take into account the issue of "difference" by including resources for their Coming Out Project that target bisexual and transgender folk as well as "communities of color" and "straight supporters" ultimately fall short (Human Rights Campaign, "Coming Out").

¹¹ See Gamson for an analysis of the sometimes hostile positions and the responses to them expressed within lesbian/gay print media. This has not been the case across the board, and many lesbians and gay men have been important allies for self-identified bisexuals and transpeople.

In particular, critical queer approaches to passing upset uncomplicated depictions of acts and narratives of passing as essentially conformist or regressive. Because passing has traditionally “been read as a conservative form of self-representation that the subject chooses in order to assume the privileges of the dominant identity,” there exists little acknowledgement of the complexities of these acts and narratives, and the circumstances that produce them (Walker 8). In lesbian/gay communities in particular, passing has often been synonymous with passing for straight. Given the prominence of the politics of coming out, passing is sometimes understood in this context as an explicit rejection of this strategy at the individual and/or social level. Of course, this ideological rejection of passing relies on the assumption that people’s identifications are straightforwardly represented by/within coming out acts and discourses. However, as the quote from Jan Brown above suggests, someone might be very much “out” in the lesbian community and at the same time experience considerable pressure to conform to community standards of acceptable gender identification(s). It is not difficult to imagine that someone could be both out as *and* passing as a butch-identified lesbian woman. Indeed, it is not uncommon for individuals to come out more than once for precisely this reason.¹²

In addition to the struggle of naming and claiming identification(s) that are often subjected to rejection, ridicule, and a range of disciplining social forces, transgendered and transsexual people also face the challenge of responding to those who read their

¹² Some trans-identified people may come out initially as lesbian or gay before articulating their gender identification(s) by coming out as trans. Alternatively, the popular saying “bi now, gay later” references a trend wherein people come out initially as bisexual, before eventually coming out as lesbian or gay; the initial outing is depicted as half-hearted and a product of internalised homophobia. Of course, there are also individuals who have done this in the reverse order.

(political and bodily) identification(s) as contrary to the theoretical and political goals within lesbian/gay and feminist communities. Inserting a critical analysis of passing could provide space for a nuanced discussion of the politics of coming out, and an examination of the fault lines of “identity politics” within lesbian/gay communities. Rather than dismissing passing as an apolitical (or politically conservative) strategy – and consequentially one not worthy of consideration – Judith Halberstam suggests that passing acts and narratives should be considered within the framework of the lives that produced them. Calling to mind the “terribly consequential seizure” that Sedgwick describes, in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* Halberstam demonstrates that the creation/imposition of transgender biographies is often a process of obliteration:

transgender biography [is] a sometimes violent, often imprecise project that brutally seeks, retroactively and with the benefit of hindsight, to erase the carefully managed details of the life of a passing person, and that recasts the act of passing as deception, dishonesty, and fraud. I will be asking here what kinds of truths about gender we demand from the lives of people who pass, cross-dress, or simply refuse normative gender categories.¹³ (48)

Implicitly, this critique of transgender biography questions the efficacy of the cultural impulse to retrospectively “make sense” of such lives – eventually occurring at the expense of the individuals’ lived experiences and their chosen self-representation. Moreover, Halberstam makes a compelling argument for situational and context-specific analyses of the politics of passing. Rejecting discourses that construct acts of passing as inherently apolitical or conservative, she reads these lives as queer projects, noting that they are “filled with contradiction and tension” (*Queer Time* 54). The example of the

¹³ As I will expand on in the following chapter the association of acts and narratives of passing with “deception, dishonesty, and fraud” are by no means limited to transgender biography. This is a long-standing representation of acts and narratives of passing across a number of discourses.

violence enacted through biography is only one of the ways in which acts and narratives of passing have been dismissed, disbelieved, or disparaged, as discussed throughout this thesis. Samuels argues that “such an overall negative perception of passing exceeds...reality” and needs to be contextualized by a more sustained consideration of a variety of passing acts (240). My own analysis is an attempt to continue this consideration.

In contrast to Halberstam, who argues for transgender passing as a queer project that resists categorization and normalization, there have also been affirmations of passing lives situated more firmly within an identity-based politics. Namaste, for example, builds an argument suggesting that passing is highly relevant to the lives of transsexual men and women. She unambiguously rejects much of the queer-inflected transgender theorizing (including Halberstam’s). Transsexuality, she argues, “is about individuals who change our physical bodies because we want to move through the world on all levels in a sex and gender other than the one assigned to us at birth.... It is not about challenging the binary sex/gender system...it is not about starting the Gender Revolution” (Namaste 20). One of Namaste’s major critiques of these queer theories/theorists is their level of abstraction from the lives of real (and specifically transsexual) people and how their “experience is organized institutionally” (23). For Namaste, gender passing is a crucial strategy in the everyday lives of transsexual people. Many of her observations about the exclusion of the lives, needs, and interests of transsexual people from transgender scholarship are constructive and add a perspective that is often sorely lacking.¹⁴ It is interesting to note

¹⁴ However, her work at times suggests that transgender theorists (and people more generally) are not also subjected to highly regulatory social expectations about acceptable gender presentation in their daily lives.

that both Namaste and Halberstam are sympathetic to the process/project of passing, despite the vast differences in their theoretical positions. While Namaste suggests that passing is a crucial strategy for transsexual people's survival ("would someone please tell me how to get an apartment when one is neither a man nor a woman?" (22)), Halberstam argues that gender passing is significant in part because "the act of passing does damage the investments made in conventional gender, sexuality, and domesticity" (*Queer Time* 72-73). That Halberstam's ideological valuation of passing may ultimately undermine the passings that Namaste defends suggests that a more nuanced analysis of passing is needed – and ideally one that is capable of accounting for both of these positions.

What begins to emerge in a review of the discourses of the closet, coming out, and passing is the notion of a core inner self struggling for representation. The practice of coming out relies on the belief that there is a "true self" that needs to be/is waiting to be expressed. Similarly, the idea that someone appearing and/or purporting to be heterosexual could actually be a lesbian or gay male (perhaps without even knowing it) is the rationale behind the closet. This same rationale depicts passing acts and narratives as deceptive. To so characterize an act or life of passing is to suggest that there is some underlying identity "other" than the one presented that is (more) authentic. Alternatively, for the passing subject, the act of passing might actually be an assertion of a "true" inner self in the face of visual and/or bodily evidence to the contrary – as Namaste's depiction of transsexuality suggests. Even queer and transgender theorists have not entirely abandoned this notion. For instance, Leslie Feinberg claims "I have lived as a man because I could not survive openly as a transgendered person," suggesting that there is

See especially Leslie Feinberg's *Trans Liberation* and *Transgender Warriors* for a consideration of the lived experience of transgendered people as well as the gender "utopia" politics Namaste critiques.

some inner truth of identity – even while rejecting the social categories of “man” and “woman” (*Warriors* 89). Passing, coming out, and closetedness are thus all struggles over representation – which is often characterized by its ability to reflect an authentic, inner self. It is this discourse of authenticity, of a “true” self, that continues to circulate and make acts and narratives of passing meaningful and noteworthy within the cultural imagination.

Passing and Performativity

All of these explanations may quite rightly suggest that the difference between drag queen behaviour and the actions of real women have much to do with the fact that their femininity is a kind of gender holiday, whereas female femininity is definitely a full-time job. (Gilbert 75)

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives considered herein, it is possible to understand passing as a particular type of representation. At times this representation is an attempt to make visible identifications that reflect the subject’s inner sense of themselves in the face of bodily and other evidence to the contrary. At other times, passing may simply be a failure to disclose information that will help to determine how the subject is understood and categorized by others. In either instance, acts of passing generate meaning about the passing subject within a cultural context that imagines identification(s) (i.e. based on gender, race, ability, and desire) as natural and therefore authentic. Even queer-inflected analyses of passing that question the naturalness of such categories tend to maintain that individual subjects experience their identification(s) as urgent and authentic, and therefore not a matter of choice. The notion that identification is *either* consciously chosen *or* experienced as authentic/natural has itself been subject to critique within queer theory. In particular, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity

resists the impulse towards such either/or theoretical perspectives by offering a more complex analysis of the cultural processes through which identification (specifically gender identification) becomes naturalized.

In her now famous theory of performativity, Butler argues that “[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being” (*Gender* 45). Simply put, for Butler a gender identity is not something that you have, but something that you do. *Gender Trouble*, in which she articulates her theory of performativity, argues for a radical de-naturalizing of both gender and sex – a project that has been widely adapted in a variety of contexts. It is worth noting that much of the recent queer scholarship discussed in this thesis follows Butler’s radical project of de-naturalizing gender and other identity-based categories. In particular, transgender theorists like Halberstam are heavily invested in her project of unsettling gender-identifications and representations. “One of the strategies she recommends is a parodic repetition of gender norms...[which she]...intends to demonstrate that the domains of gender and sexuality are not organised in terms of originality and imitation” (Jagose 85). In a later edition to *Gender Trouble*, Butler clarifies her theory, arguing that it “is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of the body” (xv). Her depiction of gender as a – largely unconscious – process of repetition/ritual reveals immediate relevance for a theory of passing. In particular, Butler’s model creates a basis from which to argue that passing is a performative project/process. At the same time, her theory of performativity refuses the suggestion that it is only passing acts that are performative representations of the subject

and the subject's identification(s). While passing is in some cases a conscious performance of an assumed "identity," it can also be an unconscious performance (consider the previous chapter's discussion of "invisible disability"). Moreover, the theory of performativity exposes the reality that the concept of the "true self" is actually a self that is always in the process of becoming, rather than existing *a priori*. Thus, it is not only the act of passing that is an attempt to bring a particular conceptualization of the self into being. Butler provides a basis from which to argue that *all* identities/identifications – even those that appear coherent and natural – are acts of passing. Both the external and the internal representations are never fully realized, but are instead brought into being through their continued repetition.

The first benefit of the theory of performativity in this context is its ability to undermine the impulse to get to the "truth" of passing acts, narratives, and lives. Additionally, by following Butler's example, it is possible to argue that there is nothing *more* natural or concrete beneath acts of passing, as it were. There is only repetition and ritual and an "appearance of substance." Butler thus returns this analysis to the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter, and to the question of "identity." In her later work, *Bodies That Matter*, she turns more explicitly to the issue of (in)coherence, and not surprisingly, identities. Her analysis of the "problem" of coherent identities is worth quoting at length:

The question here concerns the tacit cruelties that sustain coherent identity, cruelties that include self-cruelty as well, the abasement through which coherence is fictively produced and sustained. Something on this order is at work most obviously in the production of coherent heterosexuality, but also in the production of coherent lesbian identity, coherent gay identity.... In each of these cases, if identity is constructed through opposition, it is also constructed through rejection. It may be that if a lesbian opposes heterosexuality absolutely, she may find herself

more in its power than a straight or bisexual woman who knows or lives its constitutive instability. (*Bodies* 115)

Butler shows that even in the context of trying to build alliances, we cannot require “coherent identity” of ourselves and others so as to erase the ways in which our identifications are not consistently produced. Passing lives may, in fact, be the lives of people who know or live the “constitutive instability” of the categories that structure each of our identifications. After all, acts of passing have been understood as contestations over the cultural boundaries of gender, sexuality, and race long before queer theory’s explanatory intervention. As Garber asserts, “there is *only* passing. Trespassing. Border-crossing and border raids.... This is the scandal of transvestism—that transvestism tells the truth about gender” (*Vested Interests* 250). When Butler notes that coherence “is fictively produced and sustained,” she upsets the widely-held belief in the coherence of gender and/or sexuality. People who engage in acts and narratives of passing rely on the individual and cultural denial (in the sense of being *in* denial) of this incoherence. Their success is often predicated on this reality. This suggests that acts and narratives of passing are no more incoherent than those not generally conceptualized as passings. They may even be less so. If it is coherence that is fictive, where does this leave the characterization of acts of passing as deceptive fictions? To the extent that they reveal incoherence, they may in fact be gripped to a lesser degree by the regulatory and disciplinary power of the cultural institutions and norms that bind us all.

I will return to performativity, passing, and the discourses of authenticity in the following chapter, where I argue for, and begin to develop, an epistemological theory of passing that seeks to account for its multiple and sometimes contradictory projects. This

chapter examined some of the discourses and discursive silences that are relevant to a theory of passing within queer theory. I argue that such a theory should be grounded in a queer critique of identity and its associated categories, as I believe that this perspective is necessary to account for the many projects of passing – including those that are not themselves ideologically aligned with queer theory and politics. Ultimately, queer theory creates a space wherein it is possible to argue *both* that identity is not only constructed and incoherent, but finally fictive, *and* that an individual's ability to name and describe themselves is of the utmost importance. To note that categories of identity cannot ever be fully articulated is not to argue that the means of their articulation is inconsequential. On the contrary, when we appreciate the surprising absence of a wholly stable, natural, and consistent basis for our identifications this process of naming and describing takes on new weight. It has thus rightly been a matter of serious contestation. In the following chapter, I build on the theoretical framework I outline and argue for here, and begin my own theorization of passing. Incorporating a range of perspectives, experiences, and theories already considered in this thesis, I articulate a queer theory of passing. This theorization weaves together acts, narratives, and discourses of passing, and expands the epistemological project already initiated through a thorough examination of the meaning(s) assigned to *pass* in the English language. The insights of queer theory are integral to this undertaking, as I further explicate my contention that passing is not only an individual, but a social (and often political) project/process. Although the theoretical work I initiate is necessarily preliminary, it will lay the groundwork for further, more comprehensive scholarly inquiry.

Chapter 3

Epistemology: “Promising, Smuggling, Reading, Overreading”¹

For nowhere are we more ourselves than in those small, private moments when we transcend the common reality, when we experience ourselves in ways that cannot be said or understood or repeated. (Wilchins, “Queerer Bodies” 46)

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I outlined the primary discursive spaces in which passing has been contemplated. For instance, autobiographical considerations indicate that acts and narratives of passing continue to be relevant across diverse identifications and lived experiences. Acts and narratives that historically generated cultural interest and debate, such as racial and gender passing, have not disappeared. Rather, these topics are now (re)read and (re)examined, producing new analyses of systems of power, oppression, and “identity,” all of which point to their continued significance. In addition, thanks in large part to the insights of queer theory, it is also possible to create a basis for a sustained theoretical examination of passing that encompasses a range of discourses. Acts, narratives, and discourses of passing are fundamentally concerned with cultural categories/categorizations based on “identity,” and especially with the way(s) in which meaning is culturally ascribed and interpreted through the field of vision/the visible. It is perhaps inevitable that discourses of passing concern themselves primarily with particular categories of “identity” – based on race, class, gender, ability, or desire. Some analyses of passing seek to expose these categorizations – and subsequent identifications – as not only interrelated, but

¹ This phrase is taken from the chapter “Queer and Now” in Sedgwick’s collection *Tendencies* (3); she writes, “I think many adults (and I among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and...to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged” (3).

inseparable. At the same time, these discourses have arisen in distinct and historically specific ways with respect to race, gender, desire, and ability; it is therefore necessary to consider the particularities of these acts, narratives, and discourses, while recognizing that they are never fully discreet. However, without reducing or glossing over the important differences among these discourses, I believe that a theorization of passing must attempt to consider them in light of one another – exploring and acknowledging their similarities and dissimilarities. For instance, the possibility of mapping both the continuities and discontinuities that surround the creation and maintenance of categories based on “race” and “ability” is one of the benefits of a critical comparison of these discourses. Such comparisons help to expose the critical role that “race” plays in the construction of categories based on ability (for instance), and vice versa.

It is with this in mind that I initiate my own theorization of passing in this chapter. I argue here for a theory of passing that takes into account the social, cultural, and political dynamics that define acts and narratives of passing. I seek to uncover the social and cultural knowledge(s) generated through the acts, narratives, and discourses I have considered thus far. How is passing culturally defined, and how do we understand and interpret it? How are the acts and narratives of passing socially, culturally, and politically implicated in acts and narratives *not* defined as passing? As I maintain throughout this thesis, I firmly reject the notion that passing is solely (or even primarily) an individual concern. Rather, I argue that individual passing subjects traverse spaces that are socially and politically over-determined, and fraught with the anxieties and preoccupation of a cultural investment in the maintenance of hierarchical categorization and separation. Acts and narratives of passing – however regressive or progressive their means and/or aims –

are always implicated in the discourses, power dynamics, and social institutions that produce them. In seeking to clarify the ways in which knowledges of passing are accumulated culturally, I also gesture towards the social and cultural knowledge that is accumulated through acts, narratives, and discourses of passing themselves.

In (Search of) Passing

pass, v.²

- I. To excel or surpass.
- II. To proceed, move forward, depart; to cause to do this.
- III. To go by or move past; to cause to move past.
- IV. To get through, across, or over; to cause to do this.
- V. Used with reference or allusion to process of law.
- VI. To omit, decline.
- VII. To transfer, to be transferred.
- VIII. To allow, be allowed; to approve.
- IX. To circulate, have currency.
- X. To emit, give out, utter.
- XI. To care.

phrasal verbs:

- to pass beyond
- to pass by
- to pass over
- to pass through
- to pass with
- to pass away
- to pass down
- to pass forth
- to pass in
- to pass on
- to pass out
- to pass up

In my examination thus far, I laid the epistemological groundwork for a critical and queer theory of passing – identifying many of the definitional, experiential, and theoretical meaning(s) attached to passing in a variety of contexts. Bridging these

² These and all subsequent definitions included in this chapter are excerpted from the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*.

disparate discourses, I argue here that passing is always a social process/project – one that is never complete, and that implicates *all* of us, not only those of us most likely to be culturally associated with this project/process. Working within the framework of queer theory outlined earlier, my own theorization of passing in this chapter continues the epistemological project already initiated. In order to untangle the rich and often contradictory political and cultural associations with acts of passing, I integrate an equally rich array of English-language definitions of the verb *pass* and its related phrases. This linguistic interrogation is not meant to reduce passing to a discursive strategy divorced from social and political context(s) and embodied experience(s); rather, it guides my epistemological investigation. Before turning to this investigation, I want to make a few preliminary remarks about the theorization I undertake here.

This chapter instigates my own theorization of passing, and is structured around three conceptual pillars that are central to this project: failure; transience; and death. Each of these pillars represents a specific array of the cultural meanings and knowledge(s) attached to passing that emerged through my investigation into this topic. Although I trace some of the relationships among them here, it is not clear to me at this juncture to what extent, or even how, these pillars are ultimately related. I cannot say if they will continue to be useful for my own (or others') subsequent investigations on the topic of passing; however, they are (individually and collectively) my own attempt to account for recurring issues and narratives that arose throughout my reading and research. They represent my initial theoretical contribution to the subject of passing – and its associated acts, narratives, and discourses. The concepts of failure, transience, and death thus provide me with a starting point for this epistemological theorization, and furnish a

language for contemplating some of the prominent questions that arise. My decision to employ these particular conceptual pillars may at first seem counterintuitive. Why, in a thesis in which I have been critical of the overwhelmingly negative (mis)perceptions that surround acts and narratives of passing, would I choose three concepts that are so obviously loaded with their own “negative” baggage? To begin, *failure*, *transience*, and *death* are clearly useful in their capacity to reflect and illuminate the censure that is so often implicit in discourses and analyses of passing. Only by acknowledging this historical and present reality is it possible to generate a theory of passing that moves beyond one-dimensional representation, without minimizing the ongoing impact of such cultural assessments. More generally, I position my selection of these themes within a broader project in queer theory that attempts to (re)imagine and (re)centre language, people, and ideas that have been, at best, historically undervalued and marginalized.³ This is, in a sense, the task of queer theory – of queering theory – not to “rescue” or to normalize the undervalued and marginalized, but to unmask and resist the processes and politics of their marginalization, and the boundaries that work to maintain them.

Interweaving the definitional investigation I initiated above, I examine and theorize acts and narratives of passing through three conceptual pillars, or signposts. I first explore the concept of passing in relation to *failure*, and outline what I refer to as the passing system. This analysis unambiguously takes on the system of binary classifications I have considered in previous chapters, and posits that a queering of failure provides insights about available strategies of resistance to such a system. Following this, I introduce *transience*, and consider the impermanence of passing acts. I contrast passing

³ Recall Anzaldúa’s own efforts to re-centre the borderland’s inhabitants: “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead” (*Borderlands* 25).

acts with passing moments, and return to Anzaldúa's borderland, situating passing in both time and space. I also consider the relationship between passing and currency in the English-language definition of *pass* in order to (re)imagine the potential rewards and consequences of the passing moment. Finally, I turn to *death*, and examine its prominence – as a narrative, a metaphor, and a threat – in passing discourses. This section seeks to (re)conceptualize discourses of authenticity and points to the systemic threat of violence that underlies and generates acts of passing within our highly hierarchical cultural framework. Each of these forays is firmly located within the project of queer(ing) theory, and initiates a dialogue, pointing to possible theoretical trajectories for future scholarly interrogations of this subject.

Failure and the Passing System

There had to be a way to reject parts of one's connection with a system one abhorred without taking on an inauthentic shell or trying to pass for something one was not. (Shepard 329)

A common and immediately familiar use of the word *passing* – especially within educational institutions – situates passing as an alternative to failure: for instance, a passing grade.⁴ Thus, intrinsic to the language of passing is an assessment that is, as Mattilda notes, intent on “policing the borders with a pass/fail politics” (9). The possibility of failure that circulates – often unspoken – within discourses of passing also circulates in one of the most ordinary uses of *passing* in the English language. More than a simple definitional overlap, this “pass/fail politics” is the framework within which acts, narratives, and discourses of passing exist. This is the passing system. Acts and narratives

⁴ This use is most closely related to definition VIII (see page 75 of this chapter): “To be allowed or tolerated; to go uncensured or unpunished; to be successful as an expedient; to be adequate, to come up to the required standard.”

of passing accrue meaning within this system – a system that assigns meaning largely through binary oppositions. There are no acts of passing outside this system, and yet at the same time, acts of passing can and do work to shift the very system that names them, and creates the conceptual space for their existence. The concept of failure is useful here for several key reasons. An exploration of passing in relation to failure (pass/fail) helps to expose the passing system that governs and produces the cultural meaning(s) ascribed to such acts. In the absence of a critical engagement with the passing system, acts and narratives of passing continue to be represented primarily as exceptional and/or individual(istic). To date, discourses of passing often fail to integrate an analysis of passing as a social process/project; the pass/fail system thus significantly expands the discourse on this topic. Moreover, an engagement with failure (and the pass/fail system) helps to elucidate the always performative nature of passing acts, and the relationship between the individual passing subject and the passing system. At the same time, it is also useful to consider the varied and imaginative potential of failure(s) within the passing system, and to interrogate the relationship between acts that “pass” or “fail.”

As noted, acts of passing are structured primarily through a seemingly inexorable insistence on binary forms of representation and definition in Western culture(s).⁵ The list is familiar: male/female; black/white; hetero/homo. Even the terms that evoke identification rather than fixed “identity” (i.e. masculine/feminine) remain stubbornly paired. This is an ideological framework that is at once totalizing in its representational claims, and that simultaneously points to the impossibility of its categories to ever be

⁵ Much of queer theory and post-structuralism more generally is engaged with imagining alternatives to and/or deconstructing this paradigm. Despite the considerable influence of some of this work, this major paradigm of Western thought and its effects have not been easily displaced.

fully representative. There is nothing more than an oblique, a dash, separating male from female: it is always right there threatening to overlap, to spill over, to climb over. That is all the colour line is: an oblique on the page between “black” and “white.” And at the same time, it is that line that speaks so clearly to a cultural obsession with categories and categorization. This system of binary representation – of which the passing system is only a part – has two major consequences that are significant to a theoretical examination of passing. The first relates to the ways in which these paired categories are successfully and repeatedly naturalized and normalized. The second (and related) consequence is the continued cultural erasure/denial of the hierarchical ordering of these pairs. Consider that even the most superficial analyses of passing rely on the notion of hierarchical categories; but a more thoroughly and critically engaged theory of passing also must account for this cultural context, if only to work against it.

In order to better appreciate the ways that passing functions culturally, it is crucial to consider that acts of passing exist within a social framework, rather than in isolation. Within the passing system, passing is primarily a negotiation with what I refer to as the problems of “identity” and “visibility.” In her introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Ginsberg gets to the core of the cultural logic behind each of these “problems”:

passing is about specularly: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen.
(2)

presumably one cannot pass for something one *is not* unless there is some other, pre-passing, identity that one *is* [sic]. (4)

This logic governs all of the acts, narratives, and discourses of passing discussed throughout this thesis, and according to this logic, “identities” exist and can be read through the field of vision at the level of the body. However in practice, the “act of

reading” that constructs the passing subject reveals that passing is always a social project/process.⁶ It is not located on the body of the passing subject; it is rather a negotiation between the subject and the world in which they move. Acts of passing are intrinsically relational, and thus never purely individual. Moreover, because these acts need to be witnessed in order to generate meaning, they can never exist in complete isolation. The witness can be individual or collective, real or imagined, but must exist – at least as a possibility – in order for the passing act(s) to be perceived. Passing, to paraphrase Lennard Davis, is a specular moment (12).⁷ It has to be seen to be believed.

By noting that passing acts rely on (the possibility of) being seen, and therefore are subject to assessment, I am suggesting that passing is always and in essence a social and performative project/process.⁸ Recalling Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity – and contrary to the apparent logic of a pass/fail system – passing can never be fully achieved. As a performative act, it is always a gesture towards representation and identification that must be repeated and (re)enacted. Although a strictly pass/fail approach to the politics of passing is narrow, it does help to illustrate the

⁶ Judith Butler argues that reading “means taking someone down, exposing what fails to work at the level of appearance, insulting or deriding someone. For a performance to work, then, means that a reading is no longer possible, or that a reading, an interpretation, appears to be a kind of transparent seeing, where what appears and what it means coincide. On the contrary, when what appears and how it is “read” diverge, the artifice of the performance can be read as artifice...” (*Bodies* 129). This use is consistent with many passing discourses where reading often carries a negative connotation, as “being read” means being caught in a(n unsuccessful) passing performance. I use the term in a related and expanded sense that incorporates the processes of seeing and interpreting that Butler identifies, but that does not exclusively refer to being caught in the (performative/passing) act, and that is not inherently negative or insulting. Rather, I follow Wilchins’s description of reading as a “call-and-response” (“It’s Your Gender” 24).

⁷ Davis has famously made this claim with reference to disability, pointing to the deep-seated cultural belief that disability is visually identifiable and the relationship between seeing and being seen that constructs disability, and I would argue, the passing subject. This assertion works to deconstruct the notion of the “disabled person,” by referring to disability as a moment (as opposed to an identity or condition).

⁸ The sheer volume of theatrical and filmic depictions of – and analogies for – passing in Garber’s *Vested Interests* suggest that passing is already strongly associated with a particular type of performance (in the sense of acting) in the cultural imagination.

performative and social aspect of acts within the passing system. Consider again Lisa Walker's description of passing "as a conservative form of self-representation that the subject chooses in order to assume the privileges of the dominant identity" (8). According to this narrative, a *successful* act of passing enables the subject to achieve privileges associated with "dominant identity" status. In this instance, those reading the passing subject's presentation must *fail* to notice the performative nature of the act. The subject – and the subject's self-identification – must be read as natural, not performative. Here social visibility (i.e. inclusion within the "dominant identity") is contingent upon the subject's invisibility as an individual; the subject passes. If on the other hand, the identification is read as a performative act the subject fails (to pass). "Reading" is the key to this so-called traditional interpretation of passing, described as a social inscription "that encodes...its own erasure" (M. Garber 234).

While useful for illuminating passing as a social project/process, this particular articulation continues to rely on an overly simplistic understanding of passing. To begin, the supposition that passing is always consciously chosen and "conservative" in its goals is debatable, as I have noted elsewhere. Additionally, as examples considered throughout this thesis suggest, passing is not always undertaken in order to gain dominant status/privilege. As Ginsberg notes, "the rationale for passing may be more or less complex or ambiguous and motivated by other kinds of perceived rewards" (3). In particular, people who are situated at the margins of already-marginalized social groups may feel significant pressure to pass in order to gain community access/membership; alternatively they may find that their performance has the unfortunate result of rendering them (doubly?) socially invisible to the extent that they do not present/perform the

accepted markers of community membership. Significantly, these discourses have often neglected to integrate an analysis of the culturally-specific and highly unpredictable ways in which bodily performances are read. The act of reading, central to constructing subjects and acts of passing is not, moreover, a purely dispassionate and reactive process, but at times involves a series of unwelcome and even violent incursions, as Halberstam's work on transgender biography and the posthumous re-writing of passing lives illustrates. The relationship between passing and choice is also considerably more fraught than this definition of passing implies.

Undoubtedly, there are many narratives of passing in which the subject appears to self-consciously choose their presentation with a desired aim in mind. Many of the accounts of sartorial passing(s) reviewed throughout Garber's *Vested Interests*, for example, are at least implicitly conscious or chosen. In contrast is an emerging series of narratives about the role of (often inadvertent) passing, as discussed in previous chapters, including Samuels's "My Body, My Closet" in which she negotiates this complex terrain through the lens of her "two 'invisible' identities: lesbian-femme and nonvisible disability" (234). Of particular relevance is her critique of depictions that "often conflate two dynamics: passing deliberately...and passing by default" (Samuels 240). Rather, many of the narratives and discourses considered herein indicate that most acts of passing likely occur along a continuum between deliberation and default, rather than strictly within these categories. Regardless of the extent to which acts of passing are intentional, the concept of unintentional or inadvertent passing works to upset the pass/fail system insofar as this system chiefly constructs acts of passing as consciously chosen. The result of a failure to critically engage with each of these factors is a decidedly partial

comprehension of passing. A nuanced theoretical approach must ultimately reject such elements of historical discourses of passing and the pass/fail system, while simultaneously recognizing the central role they continue to play in constructing the concept.

One possible strategy toward this end is to displace the dichotomous correlation embodied within the pass/fail system. What would it mean to employ the concept of failure to queer passing, and the pass/fail system? Drawing on Judith Butler, Riki Wilchins poses the following query with respect to failure in the context of gender performance:

If my gender is a doing that has to be redone each day just like I pull on those clothes each morning, that would help explain why sometimes my gender “fails”: Even though I’ve felt like a man (and then later like a woman), people don’t always recognize me as such. Even I couldn’t always recognize me as such....

If I can “fail” accidentally, maybe there are ways I could fail on purpose that will create room for me to grow, to find new ways of expression that resonate more deeply. If gender is a doing and a reading of that doing, a call-and-response that must be continually done and re-done, then it’s also unstable, and there are ways I can disrupt it. (“It’s Your Gender” 24)

This passage appears in the introductory chapter to the *GenderQueer* anthology (Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins). This collection – and the growing number of people whose identification(s) it seeks to (re)present – is an excellent example of the type of failures I am interested in here. Working within, between, and beyond the male/female masculine/feminine binaries of the passing system, *GenderQueer*/genderqueer creates a conversation about gender identifications, one that is not (entirely) determined by the logic of a pass/fail system.⁹ This is a useful starting point, and queer and trans theories

⁹ While the term “genderqueer” is relatively new, what this collection actually demonstrates is the long-standing and ongoing failure of a two-gender, pass/fail system to account for the lived experiences of many

have provided spaces where these kinds of queries can be posited. For instance, many of the contributors to the *GenderQueer* anthology question the passing system and the two gender paradigm, as well as the emphasis on transitioning within medical and transgender and transsexual communities.¹⁰ Such critiques are relevant, and discussions of this kind are fruitful; however, to the extent that they focus solely on gender (identity, identification(s), and/or performance), they also replicate ideologies that sustain the pass/fail system. For instance, theoretical comparisons between the politics of transgender theories/activism (that call for the dismantling of the two gender system) and transsexual theories/activism (that support and rely on this system) imply that it is possible to consider gender in isolation from identifications based on discourses of race, class, sexuality, and ability.¹¹ Conversely, I argue that failure can queer the passing system, especially when acts of passing are read as the product of multiple and interrelated identifications. In addition to Wilchins's consideration of "failing" gender performances, it is necessary to ask what *other* acts of passing and/or passing failures are enacted through these performative articulations of gender identification.

people. This particular articulation may be helping to insert these issues into "mainstream" culture and consciousness, but I want to resist the idea that this is an *entirely* new trend, as this representation divorces genderqueer(s) from its/their historical and cultural roots. For instance, Joan Nestle notes, "the multiplicity of biological and constructed selves now is closer to the world I inhabited in the bars of the 1950s, when intersexed and passing people were part of the restricted and policed territory that were our public homes" (9). For the mainstreaming of "genderqueer," see Fischer's use of this, and other related terms, in a recent article in *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

¹⁰ See, for instance Wally Baird's "Disorderly Fashion."

¹¹ I am drawing a distinction here between transgender and transsexual theories/activism for the sake of comparison. In reality, these debates are considerably more complex. For an overview of these debates see Halberstam's chapter "Transgender Butch" in *Female Masculinity* (141-173); see also Namaste, esp. 1-11 (although she tends to describe these theories/theorists as oppositional).

Ultimately, it may not be possible to draw a firm line between passing acts and those acts that fail to pass. Within the passing system performative acts never fully and coherently represent the identifications that motivate them. In this sense, successful acts of passing are furtive, and exist only in particular spaces and places in time. By displacing this dominant narrative of passing and the pass/fail system a space is opened in which to explore its transgressive potential. One element of this potential is the way in which passing – as a concept and an act – disrupts the coherence of borders/boundaries. In addition to shifting the focus from the individual subject or act to the social context of acts and narratives of passing, this incoherence contributes to the ongoing project of queering within queer theory discourses. This follows the perception of queer as “ceaselessly interrogating both the preconditions of identity and its effects” (Jagose 131-32). To this end, a queering of the passing system productively fails to honour the implicit approval of coherence, permanence, stability, and longevity that is apparent in dominant constructions of “identity” and identification.

| | |
|-----------|---------------|
| visible | invisible |
| outside | inside |
| stable | unpredictable |
| choice | coercion |
| active | passive |
| exclusion | inclusion |

Transience¹² and the Passing Moment

But my experience of my body and my place in the world was exactly the opposite: mobile, private, small, often unique, and usually unknown. (Wilchins, “Queerer Bodies” 38)

¹² **transient, a.**

1. a. Passing by or away with time; not durable or permanent; temporary, transitory; esp. passing away quickly or soon, brief, momentary, fleeting.
2. Passing out or operating beyond itself; transitive; opposed to immanent.
3. Passing or flowing through; passing from one thing or person to another.
4. Passing through a place without staying in it, or staying only for a short time.

Acts of passing are conceptually and inextricably tied to movement or progression; passing itself connotes forward motion, a change in state or status, an elapse. It is a movement of/through both time and space. As a strategic form of self-presentation, passing illustrates the transient quality of “identity” and identification, exposing them as impermanent and fugitive. At the same time, acts of passing are themselves impermanent and fugitive acts; they are bound by time and space, and yet seek to disrupt the coherency of these boundaries. The idea of transience thus nods towards the always unstable, temporary, and transitory quality of acts of passing. However, as I have indicated, passing is not necessarily an exceptional act of transgression – although it can be – rather, it is a process/project that is widely engaged in with uneven and contradictory results. Like the inhabitants of Anzaldúa’s borderland, those engaged in acts and narratives of passing struggle to make themselves intelligible against and between “unnatural boundaries.” My own understanding of passing as a transient act directly relates to Anzaldúa’s borderland, which as she observes, is itself “in a constant state of transition” (*Borderlands* 25). Anzaldúa’s description of the borderland – and the people that move within it – as occupying a shifting and liminal space works to queer the pass/fail system. She resituates the passing system by arguing that spaces exist that are not entirely determined by the strict categorizations of this system. Anzaldúa thus opens up opportunities for dynamic acts of failure that refuse to honour the (il)logic of the pass/fail system.

In the interest of further queering the pass/fail system, I want to return here to my earlier depiction of passing as a (specular) moment. In the excerpt at the beginning of this chapter, Wilchins notes that she experiences her body most profoundly in “small, private

moments,” alluding to the difficulty of making sense of one’s experience(s) of embodiment outside of dominant cultural frameworks which work to naturalize and normalize a particular set of descriptive meanings. Similarly, some acts of passing attempt to articulate and make visible the subject’s own individual embodied experience in the face of the linguistic, representational, and imaginative limitations of the passing system. While these articulations may never fully represent the subject’s interpretation of the bodily experiences that motivate them, through their repeated (gestures toward) articulation, they can create moments that highlight the discontinuities generated by the passing system. This discontinuity is not unique to passing, but to the process of identification more generally; as Hall argues, identities are,

the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always “knowing”... that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a “lack”...and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them. (“Who Needs Identity” 19)

This is perhaps the conundrum that Mattilda refers to by noting that “we’re all caught in a passing net, even in our attempts to challenge, subvert, and dismantle this tyranny” (13). If identification is always an inadequate representation, it is possible to argue that each process of identification is finally an act of passing.¹³

Identification can be read as a series of passing (and/or failing) moments. Passing, which I have argued is a social process/project, is therefore always ongoing, rather than fully and finally achieved. With respect to an individual subject’s performative and representational claims, there are only moments of passing and failing to pass. The transient and temporal qualities of passing acts offer further insight into representations

¹³ Thus, following Judith Butler’s notion that gender, like drag, is always performative and imitative, I am suggesting that identification is always a passing act in that it can never adequately (re)present the embodied experiences and subject position(s) that produce it.

of such acts (and subjects) as shifting and unreliable within passing discourses. Marjorie Garber considers literary and historical examples of this particular representation of passing in her chapter “Phantoms of the Opera: Actor, Diplomat, Transvestite, Spy” (234-66). As the title suggests, there is considerable overlap in the cultural imagination between acts of passing and the potentially treasonous occupations: actor; diplomat; and spy.¹⁴ She draws a striking correlation between passing and treason, noting that: “If treason *works*, it gets mainstreamed or translated into another non-oppositional category,” and she queries whether passing is still passing when it is successful, “when undertaken as a constant rather than an episodic activity, and when undetected” (234). I would respond to Garber’s query in part by suggesting that passing is always an episodic activity, regardless of how convincing or sustained the performance. Even when acts of passing go “undetected” there is always the potential/possibility that they will fail, and be read as performative acts. This applies to both ordinary and extraordinary instances of passing. The confluence of cultural ideologies at work in the maintenance of coherent identification is always at risk of failing to adequately shore up this performative articulation from moment to moment.

Acts of passing may occur only within the success or failure of a particular moment, but the entirety of these moments is more than the sum of its parts: passing moments can converge to create the appearance of a “constant rather than episodic” performative identification. In other words, successful passing moments taken in their

¹⁴ In this chapter, Garber also points to the recurrence of the opera house and/or theatre in (the often overlapping) literary and historical accounts of passing and cross-dressing. Her analysis of the “real life” events that inspired David Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly* (where acting, diplomacy, spying, transvestism, and the opera house all converge) provides a particularly nuanced analysis of the role of culturally-specific ideological expectations of gender, sexuality, race, and nationalism in constructing accounts of this story.

totality can work to generate the appearance of coherent and believable identification(s), and create social currency for the passing subject. It is, perhaps not surprisingly, within the concept of currency that the definition of passing most closely related to this exploration is found.

IX. To circulate, have currency.

42. To go or move about; to travel; to be alive and active; to pass on earth: to be alive, to exist.

43.

a. to pass for (also as): to be taken for or to serve as (usually with the implication of being something else); to be accepted or received as equivalent to.

b. to pass under (also by): to be generally known by (a particular name).

c. to pass upon (also on): to impose upon; to gain credit with; to dupe.

d. to be accepted as or believed to be, or to represent oneself successfully as, a member of an ethnic or religious group other than one's own, esp. one having higher social status; spec. (of a person of black ancestry in a racially segregated society) to be accepted as white. Later also: (of a transsexual) to be accepted as a member of a different sex.

44. To be in circulation; to be current, have currency.

45. To give currency to; to put into circulation.

I believe that the definitional association between currency and passing adds considerable nuance to a theorization of passing, and the passing moment. By appreciating how moments of passing work to generate currency for particular subject positions and/or identifications, it is possible to further circumvent the superficial determination of "passing" or "failing." Moreover, this characterization of passing is relevant to passing acts that are consciously chosen or otherwise; it is also equally applicable to acts across a broad spectrum of social and political motivations. The concept of currency provides a language for asking questions about the politics of specific acts of passing and the identification(s) they both generate and reflect. This language also makes it possible to ask the sometimes difficult questions about (dis)continuities between the aims and effects

of particular acts of passing, for instance, and to articulate the differential impacts between and amongst moments of passing (and failure). Furthermore, there are critical questions that need asking about the explicit and implicit motivations for deliberate acts of passing – including the individual and social consequences of such acts. Questioning the cumulative political costs associated with creating currency for particular identifications is perhaps a more useful approach than those evinced by discourses that see passing acts – and passing subjects – as innately regressive and/or assimilationist. Similarly, the shift from passing acts to passing moments encourages located analyses that are equipped to account for the contradictory impulses so often present in passing acts, narratives, and discourses.

An analysis of passing acts as transient (i.e. not durable or permanent; temporary, transitory) provides a useful inroad to the project of queering the passing system that I am invested in here. In particular, this analysis demonstrates that there are concrete advantages to be gained by rejecting the cultural logic that assumes the value of coherence, stability, and permanence above incoherence, instability, and impermanence. Rather, when passing is approached as a series of impermanent acts that occur in discrete moments, it is possible to begin to consider the actual politics of passing and the effects of the passing system. In the following section I turn to the potential costs associated with such acts or moments of passing. In particular, I consider the threat of death/violence as a persuasive force in the performance of coherent and stable identifications, and contemplate the possibility of creating identifications outside the passing system. If death is the ultimate penalty for transgression of social, cultural, and political norms, it also

therefore suggests the need for renewed efforts of resistance to this dominant framework, and to the pass/fail system.

Death and the Discourses of Authenticity

the scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large. There is no major institutionalized discourse that offers a firm resistance to that undertaking... most sites of...mass culture enforce it unquestioningly, and with little hesitation at even the recourse to invasive violence. (Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 161)

I am aware that some aspects of the argument I have advanced here tend towards abstraction from actual instances of passing, and passing lives. In particular, I have argued that every articulation of identification (performative or otherwise) can be understood as an act of passing, reflecting the wide reach of the passing system. This argument works in part to reconsider the types of acts and individuals typically associated with passing, and thereby to question the logic that reads passing acts (and individuals) as inherently politically regressive and/or conservative. However, to argue that we are all “caught in a passing net” is not to argue that we are all similarly situated within the power dynamics of a pass/fail system and its attendant social discourses and institutions. For many individuals, acts of passing represent a departure from the safety and logic of intelligible identity-based categories. Border-zones often are spaces of intensified policing, and as such are fraught with danger and unpredictability. That the act of passing is ultimately understood as an act of *trespassing* reflects the hostility with which these acts are sometimes met. As the narratives and discourses included herein indicate, acts of passing (as well as acts of *not* passing) are often a response to ongoing cultural legacies of racist white supremacy, misogyny, heterosexism, cisgender privilege, and ableism. Given this context, it is perhaps not surprising that death is a recurring preoccupation

within narratives of passing. The threat of death/violence is the ultimate and final penalty for those acts of passing that redistribute access to power/privilege (this threat additionally extends to all acts of passing insofar as they are perceived as acts of deception). In light of these experiential realities, I turn here to a consideration of the ways that (the threat of) death/violence – real or imagined – functions within acts, narratives, and discourses of passing.

While there have certainly been instances of violence/death enacted upon individuals engaged in acts of passing, the imagined threat of violence is no less instrumental in constructing passing as a dangerous and treasonous act. It is important however, to guard against an exploration of this topic that entirely collapses the distinctions between actual instances of violence and the ways in which the threat of violence contributes to the discourse of passing. At the same time, it is not always helpful to understand real and imagined violences as absolutely distinct.¹⁵ In particular, the (imagined) threat of violence may be no less coercive than actual instances of violence. This is especially true where the threat of death/violence is organized systemically and/or is an historical reality for a particular group of people. For instance, the obsession with discourses of racial passing within dominant US culture, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, can be read to reflect an implicit (albeit repressed) acknowledgement of the violence enacted through the organization of a white supremacist culture. In other words, what incentives to pass would there be without the consequent privilege associated with

¹⁵ For instance, Brandon Teena's now infamous 1993 murder is both a real and an imagined violence. The reality of his death is apparent, and at the same time, Brandon's story has additionally been (re)read and (re)imagined by many people, leading to "fierce identitarian battles between transsexual activists and gay and lesbian activists, with each group trying to claim Brandon Teena as one of their own" (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 22).

whiteness? For those “black” individuals who pass as “white,” passing offers an opportunity to escape systemic violence, as well as in some instances, (the threat of) actual instances of physical violence and death.¹⁶ Similarly, people with mental and physical impairments continue to face the violence of systemic discrimination. Historically institutionalized, the lives of people with particular disabilities continue to be threatened with violence/death, especially in light of pre-natal technological “advances” that screen impairments such as Down Syndrome. Often framed as an issue of reproductive choice, such debates actually continue a long-standing history of eugenics, and normalize the notion that the value of the lives of people with disabilities is itself subject to debate.¹⁷ For many people, passing remains a (sometimes coercive) strategy for negotiating the threat of violence and erasure.

The irony is that the act of passing actually exposes the individual passing subject to an alternate threat of death/violence. The threat of violence associated with being “caught out” in a passing act suggests a double-bind for individuals who engage in passing in order to avoid/escape the threat of physical death/violence, as well as the systemic violence of discriminatory social institutions and discourses.¹⁸ Depicted as a punishment for deception, this reactionary response to acts and narratives of passing is linked to their related definitional association with currency, specifically: “to pass upon

¹⁶ Recall that Wald links “post-passing” narratives with increasing social and economic opportunities for African Americans in the post-war era, implying a shift in the social cost of “blackness” that resulted in fewer incentives to pass (or possibly fewer disincentives *not* to pass); see 116-151, esp. 118-119.

¹⁷ For feminist/disability perspectives on these debates see Asch and Geller; see also Hubbard.

¹⁸ As I’ve suggested elsewhere, the basis for this threatened/threatening response to acts of passing is sometimes a resistance to the passing subject’s attempt to redistribute access to power/privilege. For instance, there was a particular ideological valuation of masculinity behind the violence enacted upon Brandon Teena. However, this does not imply that male-to-female transsexuals (for instance) are not subjected to (the threat of) violence, despite the fact that their passing does not constitute a claim to power/privilege not associated with their biological bodies.

(also on): to impose upon; to gain credit with; to dupe” (see page 90 in this chapter). In addition to its threatening presence within actual acts and narratives of passing, death is also a central metaphor constructing discourses of passing. In Nella Larson’s novel *Passing*, death is the inevitable result of a lifetime of gender/racial passing; “passing carries the double meaning of crossing the color line and crossing over into death [sic]” (Butler, *Bodies* 183). The metaphor of passing on/over/away thus represents the death of “authentic identity” entailed in acts of passing, and is arguably the logical extension of a discourse that ascribes true or authentic status to identity-based categories and identification.¹⁹ If identification is conceptualized as such, passing becomes representative of a loss, articulated as death. Metaphorically, death represents the loss of (an authentic) identity – or at least the loss of its visibility/intelligibility. In Larson’s *Passing* for instance, the death of the passing subject Clare, is both the product of her ongoing social invisibility and the price paid for the moment in which her “authentic” race becomes visible: “the exposure of her color leads straightway to her death, the literalization of a ‘social death’ [sic]” (Butler, *Bodies* 183). In this way, death is also the stage on which the incoherencies of identity are exposed.

Notwithstanding its conceptual complexities, the metaphor of passing as death is compelling. Like death, passing is a border crossing which requires that the subject enter a foreign terrain, cut off from family and familiar institutions. The subject must make meaning in/of a new space without the benefit of an accessible cultural/social script. In order to be convincing, the narrative of passing as death presupposes that there are

¹⁹ This metaphor links the types of passing acts considered here with definition II (see page 75 of this chapter): “Of a person, or a soul or spirit: to go to one’s spiritual destination; To die; With adverb or preposition, as to pass hence, etc. to pass away.”

knowable and reliable distinctions between the familiar and the foreign. Death becomes symbolic of a definitive boundary, which cannot be blurred or shifted.²⁰ It is therefore interesting – and perhaps ironic – to note that the process/project of passing in many instances actually exposes the degree to which identity categories and/or boundaries are shifting and impermanent. Like discourses of “realness” and “home,” death occupies a contradictory space within passing discourses. The issue of authenticity, which is present throughout discourses of passing, is particularly relevant to the narrative of passing/death. Insofar as passing signifies death, it ultimately reinforces and reifies the cultural logic that constructs processes of identification as coherent and authentic. Here is the dilemma of the metaphor of passing as death – and indeed of passing generally – that it can work both to expose the constructedness of boundaries and identities and to reinforce them at the same time. Acts of passing and passing lives have a transgressive potential, but they are by no means necessarily radical.²¹ Passing can be a strategy for shoring up power and privilege without challenging the institutions that maintain their unequal distribution. On the other hand, passing can also be a strategy for exposing as myth the categorizations upon which these institutions are based. Moreover, as with passing by default and passing deliberately, these strategies are not always fully discreet. It is therefore perhaps more fruitful to think of passing as a moment within which various

²⁰ For an alternate consideration of death in the context of queer theory, see Edelman who argues that the price of admission into the field of politics is the unquestioning cultural acceptance of the “absolute privilege of heteronormativity” which creates “a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future it intends” (2-3). He equates queerness with the death drive and a lack of futurity, and contends that “[r]ather than rejecting...this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might...do better to consider accepting and even embracing it” (Edelman 4).

²¹ Moreover, it is not helpful to limit this consideration to those acts that can be read as “radical.” We must remember Namaste’s critique of this tendency within queer theory: “activists and academics set a very dangerous precedent if we maintain that people’s identities are acceptable only if and when they can prove that they are politically useful. Who gets to decide what constitutes ‘politically useful’ anyways?” (8).

contests for meaning and power are enacted. Recall Wald's contention that "[p]assing entails...not racial transcendence, but rather struggles for control over racial representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied appearances" (6). The move to (re)conceptualize passing in this way provides one possible framework for thinking about passing without falling into the trap of defining it (solely) according to the degree to which particular acts/narratives are understood as transgressive.

This struggle over representation is relevant to a wide range of passing acts. I argue that a critical queer theorization of passing has the potential to challenge historical analyses of passing, and to proliferate the types of identification(s) that are made possible through acts of passing/not passing. Reflecting on the potential pitfalls of social construction (i.e. queer) theory, Carole Vance posits that "[t]o the extent social construction theory strives for uncertainty through questioning assumptions rather than seeking closure, we need to tolerate ambiguity and fluidity" (30). From this perspective, the contradictions raised by passing in general and passing as death in particular need not be seen as a dilemma *per se*. Vance further argues that social construction theory, like liberation movements, should be a process of open-ended imagining (30). While this may in part be a utopian project, it is one that is sorely needed. The potential cost associated with acts of passing that seek to imaginatively articulate (sometimes repudiated) subject positions and/or to redistribute access to power is great, but the cost of not doing so is greater. There are a limited number of culturally available (and intelligible) identifications, and there are further restrictions imposed on the people that have access to such identifications. This suggests that there is a basis from which to argue for a proliferation of identification – including acts of passing and "failure," as Wilchins

imagines them. In an often-hostile social climate, imaginative acts of passing and failure of this kind are not always possible. For many individuals, the associated risk of venturing outside the pass/fail system is too high; it is precisely this reality that makes these acts so crucial where they are possible. The individuals whose narratives appear in the *GenderQueer* anthology are deconstructing the passing system one step at a time, and are creating new possibilities for expressions of gender, sex, and desire. In a culture with an “endemic” wish that “gay people *not exist* [sic]” (Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 161), these are crucial acts of resistance.

As indicated, my theorization here of passing through *transience*, *failure*, and *death* is still in the preliminary stages. Considerable potential remains, I believe, for an extensive negotiation with these concepts. In particular, it would be useful to integrate these three conceptual signposts more fully with the acts, narratives, and discourses I consider throughout. Further expansion of my critique of the passing (pass/fail) system is needed, as is a more fully expanded analysis of the concept of transience, and especially the related concept of currency, in relation to passing discourses. For instance, the notion of currency may offer useful theoretical inroads into the social/cultural processes through which acts and narratives come to be associated, or *not* associated, with discourses of passing. Narratives of death/violence, as I discuss in the concluding chapter, provide a crucial entry point for future theorizations of passing, which would be pertinent across a number of fields. This chapter presents a preview of, and a basis for, additional scholarship on this topic that moves beyond the framework of “identity,” and that attempts to account for passing as a dynamic social process/project. Ultimately, the vast range of definitional/ideological cultural investments in discourses of passing indicate

that acts and narratives of passing are more complex than previously imagined, and that there are significant risks, costs, and benefits – at the individual and social levels – associated with them. Moreover, they indicate that passing acts, narratives, and discourses provide a lens through which to evaluate these ideological investments, and the social and cultural knowledge(s) and meaning(s) they represent.

Conclusion

This thesis represents an initial stage within a larger, more sustained project of theorizing passing. I demonstrate the need for a theorization that accounts for diverse acts, narratives and discourses of passing, and its relevance within queer theory. The absence of such a consideration (queer or otherwise) within the Canadian context suggests that continued inquiry would be pertinent. “Identity,” “visibility,” and “authenticity” as noted at the outset of this thesis, are prominent issues within Canadian cultural formations, and the organization of the Canadian nation-state. As part of a critical engagement with discourses of “multiculturalism,” Bannerji argues that in the context of race,

[e]verything that can be used is used as fodder for visibility, pinning cultural and political symbols to bodies and reading them in particular ways. Thus for non-whites in Canada, their own bodies are used to construct for them some sort of social zone or prison, since they can not crawl out of their skins, and this signals what life has to offer them in Canada. This special type of visibility is a social construction as well as a political statement. (120)

This reality suggests that a consideration of (racial) passing is unequivocally relevant, as does Jhappan’s call for further reflection on “hybrid” racial identities (68). Moreover, there is a need, as previously noted, to integrate the discourse of passing into scholarship concerned with Métis peoples in Canada. Given the (dis)similarities between the cultural organization of race in Canada and the US, a comparative study would be additionally illustrative. Though it need not be limited to *racial* passing, an investigation of passing in Canadian society (comparative or otherwise) would fill a considerable gap and help ground future analyses; it could also prove instructive to related discourses of “identity” and “visibility” more broadly.

Indeed, I hope that this thesis illustrates the significance of a theory of passing within a number of related fields of scholarly inquiry, including those I take account of here. A critical exchange between discourses that construct categories of race, gender, sexuality, and disability is vital; passing offers one avenue for this kind of exchange. What is required now is a series of sustained and located conversations between and amongst these fields, not in order to collapse them, but to account for their mutually constitutive processes/projects. Queer theory, which articulates viable alternatives to identity-based politics, offers a theoretically rigorous basis for this critical exchange. Expanded to account for discourses of passing, queer theory also can be strengthened through the challenge to incorporate experiences and identifications produced through discourses such as race and (dis)ability. More importantly, it will be moved to account for its own (often unacknowledged) production/erasure of such identifications. In respect to queer theory specifically, this thesis provides an alternative to dominant inside/outside narratives of “the closet” and “coming out,” while acknowledging their continued importance, especially in relation to cultural conceptions of “sex/gender/desire” (Butler *Gender*).

These narratives have shifted, and this shifting initiates a renewed interrogation of their place within contemporary queer politics. As an alternative to this inside/outside logic, a queer theory of passing suggests that “coming out” tactics – while of strategic use – ultimately replicate the pitfalls of identity-based politics, and continue to represent identifications (“identities” as per this logic) as concrete, authentic, and stable. A queer reading of acts and narratives of passing, on the other hand, avoids reproducing this conception. My own analysis queers coming out narratives/tactics that neglect default (or

unintentional) acts of passing; even consciously chosen acts of passing – supposedly contrary to the politics of coming out – are reconceptualized. Situated analyses of passing therefore do not indicate a clear distinction between chosen and default acts of passing, but rather spaces of considerable overlap. Importantly, a queer theory of passing does not deny the persuasive ideological force of discourses of “authenticity” and the “true self” which sustain narratives of the closet and coming out, and construct acts of passing as consciously chosen. Rather, it gestures toward the centrality of these discourses to acts and narratives of passing. At the same time, my analysis suggests that a queer theory of passing allows us to consider the pivotal place of “authenticity” in acts and moments of representation and identification, without falling into the trap of essentialism. Although passing discourses generally maintain an ambivalent position toward the notion of authenticity (recall the discourses of “home” and “realness”), queer theory suggests this ambivalence may be fruitful, and need not be definitively resolved. These contradictions provide valuable insight(s) into the process/project of passing and identification.

Given the necessary constraints of this project, there are a number of theoretical concepts/perspectives that could additionally strengthen a queer theorization of passing which I am not able to incorporate here. Although I cannot predict in advance to what extent these concepts might shape or shift the theoretical developments I have generated, I believe that they could benefit future scholarly inquiry on this topic. Firstly, throughout this thesis I point to the “problems” of identity and visibility. While developments within queer theory allow me to confront the issue of identity beyond an “identity politics” framework, further theoretical scaffolding is needed with respect to the issue of visibility. In particular, given that I advocate for an understanding of passing as a social

process/project, an interrogation of the differences (and similarities) between individual and social strategies with respect to visibility could prove instructive. Furthermore, as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, visibility has long been a means and an end for the lesbian/gay liberation movement(s). Despite the enduring prominence of this strategy in many social movements, it has its critics. To the extent that the project of increasing the visibility of queers is also a project of making them acceptable to the mainstream, queer theorists like Warner are critical of this goal (*The Trouble with Normal*). Similarly, as I note at the beginning of this chapter, Bannerji voices a related concern with respect to racial(ized) visibility; specifically, she argues that “[t]his special type of visibility is a social construction as well as a political statement” (120). The complex individual and social dynamics at work within acts, narratives, and discourses of passing with respect to (in)visibility therefore require further consideration.

There are two theoretical concepts that could further strengthen a theorization of passing acts and narratives, and these concepts are additionally relevant relative to the discussion of death/violence initiated in the previous chapter. Throughout this thesis there are references to the violences that construct acts and narratives of passing, and the passing subject. I note that acts of passing are in large part produced through the fundamentally hierarchical process of categorization, which is implicated within, and generative of, oppressive institutions and discourses. Acts and narratives of passing are therefore produced through social and cultural discourses of racism, ableism, and misogyny (for instance), including a range of differently coercive forces. In the context of passing, these discourses at times result in acts of violence and/or erasure; recall, for instance: the spectre of the (threat of) physical violence/death that haunts acts and

narratives of passing; the violence enacted through transgender biography that seeks “to erase the carefully managed details of the life of a passing person” (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 48); the denial/erasure of physical impairments in family photos (Linton 19-20), and the intrusion of “the stare” that people with disabilities are subjected to, as “the ritual social enactment of exclusion from...the fully human” (Garland-Thomson “Staring Back” 335); and what Wald refers to as the “racialized hierarchies of spectatorship” (153), not to mention the “one drop” rule that is the framework for so many acts of racial passing. I argue herein that it is in part the violence of these institutionalized discourses that construct and produce acts and narratives of passing at the level of the social.

Judith Butler argues that even in the most ordinary instances, representation is a negotiation of the “tacit cruelties that sustain coherent identity” (*Bodies* 115). When a self-identified queer passes for straight (I am referring here to a particular enactment that relies on the shoring up of identifications based on sex, gender, and desire) out of *fear* – whatever form(s) this fear takes – this is, in part, an act of violence against the self. We must always remember that this act, when it takes place within the context of a culture with an “endemic” wish that “gay people *not exist* [sic]” (Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 161), is a response to existing social, political, and cultural contexts. Indeed, the logic of “coming out” implicitly recognizes this – coming out is an individual strategy that seeks to shift the terms of these contexts. Whether an act of passing is made by *choice* or *default*, it is always – at least in part – constructed through violence. This includes institutional or systemic violence(s) – the social, cultural, and political structures that maintain categories of “identity,” and that value some of these categories at the expense of others. It includes what Sedgwick calls the “privilege of unknowing” (*Tendencies* 23-51), and it also

includes *epistemic* violence and its project of knowledge production/repression (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”). Further theorization needs to interrogate these dynamics, and, in particular, the concept of “epistemic violence.” To what extent could acts of passing be conceptualized as a response to such violence(s), and representative of the passing subject’s desire to “speak” their own knowledge(s) through identification and representation? How might the incorporation of such dynamics expand historical analyses of passing *and* the social, cultural, and political dynamics that produce such acts and narratives?

Future analyses of passing need additionally to engage theoretical perspectives on “the body.” There is some danger here of becoming overly focused on the types of bodies that “can” and “cannot” (successfully) engage in various acts of passing, downplaying the importance of historical/cultural contexts in “reading” bodies. Such analyses evoke the fascination with racial passing, and risk (further) dehumanizing passing subjects. In particular, I argue that future analyses of passing would benefit from theoretical perspectives on the body generated within disability studies, in part because these disability-related perspectives and experiences have not yet been adequately integrated within discourse of passing, and in part because disability studies extends and adds considerable nuance to theories of the body in recent years (see Siebers). Thus, because discourses of passing often represent passing acts and narratives of passing as concerned with a particular disparity – between the social and individual, between the physical body and a “true” inner self, between representation and perception – I believe that Wendell’s concept of “transcendence” (*Rejected Body* 165-79) could be informative here.

Wendell offers an alternative to Cartesian mind/body dualism by suggesting that rather than asserting mind over body (or *vice versa*), both body and mind are mediums through which we become conscious, and she argues for some “strategies of disengagement” from the body (*Rejected Body* 173), while also highlighting its importance to/for consciousness. Criticizing feminist reclamations of the female body for failing to consider bodily experiences that are limited, involve suffering, or are otherwise not pleasurable (166-68), Wendell notes that people with disabilities often rely on and develop strategies in order to distance themselves from their bodies/bodily experiences. However, for Wendell, the “transcendence of the body” is not a rejection/abjection of the body:

It is because they increase the freedom of consciousness that I am drawn to calling these strategies forms of transcendence. It is because we are led to them by the body’s pain, discomfort, or difficulty, and because they are ways of interpreting and dealing with bodily experience that I call them transcendence of the body. (*Rejected Body* 178)

Despite the fact that Wendell does not intend her theoretical contribution to be taken on by non-disabled people, it may be relevant here, given that passing subjects are (sometimes) caught in a similar bind with respect to their bodily experiences and/or identifications. Importantly, transcendence does not imply rejection/abjection of the body (or the difficulties it produces); rather, it is incorporated into the “strategies of disengagement” she describes. Although Wendell is not working within queer theory or post-structuralism, through her concept of transcendence she advocates an understanding of the body (and mind) that relies on a both/and, rather than either/or framework. I believe that transcendence – as Wendell understands it – may prove useful for analyses of

passing, particularly so for those acts and narratives of passing concerned with negotiating “the body’s pain, discomfort, or difficulty” (*Rejected Body* 178).

I contend that closer engagement with the social discourses of passing exposes the complex, and often painful, circumstances that work to produce acts and narratives of passing. This is not to suggest that there are not acts of passing that are conservative or even regressive in their goals; there certainly are. Many self-consciously chosen acts of passing are likely not aligned with the queer politics that infuse my own analysis. However, to so characterize acts and narratives of passing unambiguously is to ignore the powerful social, cultural, and political dynamics at play. Moreover, as discourses of passing are opened up to considerations of unintentional (or default) acts and narratives, there is a clear need for a reconsideration of “traditional” analyses. The recent proliferation of experiential narratives provides new insight into the politics of passing, as well as the discourses that construct them as such. Narratives of passing and “invisible” disability, for instance, greatly expand the terrain of scholarship on passing *and* in disability studies. Given that the concept of “identity” retains cultural importance – and is perhaps more important than ever, as identifications proliferate – I believe that passing will continue to be of interest to many. In light of this, increasingly situated analyses of passing acts and narratives are needed. While I argue for located analyses that recognize the social and cultural dynamics of passing, I also argue that it is crucial to ask the sometimes-difficult questions about the kinds of currency that passing acts and narratives generate. If passing acts and narratives respond to social, cultural, and political dynamics, they are also an investment in particular identifications and representations, and as such are themselves social, cultural, and political projects. It is an awareness of precisely the

political nature of these projects that makes the thoughtful experiential accounts of passing considered here so crucial. Through these individual moments of “passing” and “failing,” social, cultural, and political projects/processes are revealed.

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