



Disability  
*and* Passing

*Blurring the Lines of Identity*

Jeffrey A. Brune AND Daniel J. Wilson

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EDITED BY

Jeffrey A. Brune  
Daniel J. Wilson



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## Disability and Passing





## Introduction

JEFFREY A. BRUNE AND  
DANIEL J. WILSON

**D**ISABILITY PASSING is a complex and wide-ranging topic. Most often, the term refers to the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as “normal.”<sup>1</sup> However, it also applies to other ways people manage their identities, which can include exaggerating a condition to get some type of benefit or care. Going further, disability passing encompasses the ways that others impose, intentionally or not, a specific disability or non-disability identity on a person. It even provides a framework for understanding how the topic of disability is ignored in texts and conversations.

The topic of disability passing reveals the dynamic nature of disability and identity and provides insight into what is at stake when it comes to disability and nondisability identification. Nearly all disabled people confront, often routinely, the choice of hiding their disability or drawing attention to it and the question of what to do when others overlook it. Going to the root of a disability identity, their decisions weigh issues of stigma, pride, prejudice, discrimination, and privilege but rarely put the matter to rest. Even those who choose not to pass still must decide what to do when others fail to recognize or intentionally overlook their disability. Furthermore, the importance of passing extends well beyond the individual and has larger social, cultural, and political implications. Quite simply, it is hard to understand disability and identity in modern America without examining issues of passing.

Passing is an act that blurs the lines between disability and normality, but those lines were not always sharp to begin with. As the field of disability studies has shown, minds and bodies are better understood in terms of variance than as deviation from a fixed norm. This in part accounts for many disabled people's ability to pass so often and so easily. Rather than assume a dichotomy between disability and normality, an examination of passing from a disability perspective reveals how the social construction of disability remains fluid. It also informs our understanding of what constitutes "normal," since passing expresses, reifies, and helps create concepts of normality.

Despite its importance, disability passing has received inadequate attention from scholars until now. Almost all studies of passing focus on race, gender, or sexuality and fail to account for disability as a fundamental, destabilizing component of a person's identity.<sup>2</sup> This reflects a more widespread reluctance among mainstream scholars to consider disability as an analytic category alongside the others. By the same token, within disability studies passing has received relatively little attention, despite acknowledgment of its importance.<sup>3</sup> This book is an effort to address that neglect.

In addition to exploring the topic of disability passing, this interdisciplinary anthology aims to avoid the trap of sequestering disability, race, class, gender, and sexuality from one another. Intersectionality, which considers how all those categories interact and affect one another, provides a more nuanced and accurate understanding of identity. Passing as a disabled or nondisabled person will have a different meaning depending on specific contexts of race, gender, class, and sexuality. What disability passing meant for an enslaved African American woman in the antebellum South is far different from what it meant for an educated white man in the post-World War II era. Disability can destabilize gender and race, and vice versa. The focus on intersectionality that many of these chapters share should also make this book useful to people interested primarily in identity issues other than disability. However, readers will notice a more thorough treatment of gender and sexuality than of race. This unfortunate circumstance is one we had hoped to avoid but in the end could not. We will note that this shortcoming still reflects a general tendency within disability studies to focus more on gender and sexuality than on race.

The act of passing occurs on an intimate, interpersonal level and often relates to issues of stigma. Our discussion of passing builds on, but

also differs significantly from, a classic work that remains seminal and is often cited in disability studies: Erving Goffman's *Stigma*.<sup>4</sup> Given that the work was written fifty years ago, before disability studies existed as a recognized field of study, it is remarkable that it still holds such sway. This anthology, serendipitously published during the year of *Stigma*'s fiftieth anniversary, offers an ideal opportunity to reexamine one of the most enduring works in the field.

Many within the field of disability studies continue to use *Stigma* and cite it without criticism, but a few serious critiques deserve attention. One has to do with the sites Goffman chose for understanding disability. To approach the issue of stigma, Goffman focused on personal encounters—what he called “the primal scene of sociology”—arguing that they are the locations where stigma is created and learned. The Marxist geographer Brendan Gleeson offers a brief but searing critique of Goffman for ignoring the larger structural forces that shape notions of disability. To Gleeson, personal encounters represent merely the outcome of powerful social, economic, and political forces. Upset that disability studies continues to embrace Goffman's approach, Gleeson suggests completely doing away with Goffman's “interactionist fallacy.”<sup>5</sup>

This materialist critique has merit and deserves more attention than it has received, but it should not provoke us to completely jettison an examination of passing and identity on an interpersonal level. As many chapters in this volume show, a synthesis in which we understand passing and identity on both a micro and a macro scale is possible. Larger social, political, economic, and cultural forces create contexts and conditions that affect passing and identity, but they are not completely deterministic and do not reveal the individual consequences of disability issues.

Another criticism of Goffman's work is that he approached disability only from the perspective of normality, positioning himself and his reader as “normals” and disabled people as “others.”<sup>6</sup> This serious problem, however, is not difficult to rectify. The chapters in this anthology examine stigma but privilege a disabled perspective. Ours is by no means an original contribution, since one of the main emphases of disability studies has been to center a disabled perspective. This approach is also more useful for understanding the social construction of normality, which expands the range of disability studies.

This anthology offers another correction to Goffman's assumptions about disability, using history to counter his essentialist assumptions.

These essays seek to historicize passing and, by extension, stigma. Stigma is not fixed, natural, essential, or transhistorical; rather, it changes over time and varies across regions, cultures, and other contexts. Goffman, by contrast, sought to make claims about the universal production and function of stigma. His universalist assumptions are not surprising, given the trends within his discipline at the time and that his “primal scene of sociology” uses terminology that comes directly from Freud. However, as Gelya Frank points out, Goffman’s study of stigma was rooted in the 1950s and would not account for the vast changes that came soon after with the disability rights movement and disability pride.<sup>7</sup> Frank could have added that Goffman’s generalizations about stigma also did not account for some 1950s disability activists, including many within the National Federation of the Blind, as well as earlier examples. This anthology examines stigma, which Goffman originally explained in universalist terms, and shows how the issue changes over time and across spaces and (sub)cultures. It is our hope that this volume will further the project of understanding disability according to historical context rather than universalist assumptions and explanations. Within disability studies there is still a disagreement, not made explicit enough, between those who imply universalist or essentialist explanations of disability and those who historicize issues of disability. Readers should take note of this debate and locate this anthology in the latter camp.

The anthology takes a scholarly approach to passing, but like most of disability studies, it also aims to effect political and personal transformation. Passing becomes a site of conflict between those who derive power from defining the boundaries of normality and those who lose rights and privileges when they are labeled deviant. This scholarship on passing can and should have an impact on nonacademic audiences. It can affect the way people deal with disability on a personal and political level.

We hope this anthology does not lead to condemnation of those who pass and that readers will recognize that the political, personal, and moral issues that relate to passing are not always as simple as they appear. Some of these essays draw attention to the costs of passing that disabled people might want to consider as they grapple with their own identity issues. Passing can take a psychological toll and can also reinforce—or, at least, fail to challenge—the stigma of disability. However, the meaning, costs, and morality of passing are not clear-cut. For all

marginalized peoples who pass, “The allure of rewriting identity cannot be disconnected from the very real emotional and material advantages of doing so.”<sup>8</sup> Passing can be more complicated than simply an acceptance or internalization of the stigma of disability. The meaning of passing varies widely according to context and can represent a challenge to power rather than simply an acceptance of oppression and stigma. Furthermore, as Linda Schlossberg points out when writing about passing in the context of race, religion, and sexuality, “Passing is not simply about erasure or denial, as it is often castigated but, rather, about the creation and establishment of an alternative set of narratives. It becomes a way of creating new stories out of unusable ones, or from personal narratives seemingly in conflict with other aspects of self-presentation.”<sup>9</sup> Even when passing seems to reinforce the stigma of disability, it is more productive, and more just, to challenge the ableism that compels people to pass rather than blame the individuals who choose to do so.

*Disability and Passing* brings together eight essays that explore the diverse ways in which passing occurs. The essays describe ways to pass with a variety of disabilities, including blindness, deafness, physical impairments, mental illness, intellectual and cognitive disabilities, and menstruation, and the way that disability passes out of texts and public discourse. Since passing is an unstable condition, the authors also discuss the ways in which passing changes over time. A changing social environment, such as that which followed the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, could make it advantageous to come out as disabled to benefit from newly available services. Or bodily changes associated with aging could necessitate adopting new and more obvious assistive devices that made passing impossible. In still other cases, adopting a disabled identity and taking up advocacy on behalf of individuals with disabilities warranted abandoning the effort to pass as normal. The decision to try to pass or not was and is difficult and complex, and the authors of these essays have acknowledged the complexities associated with trying to appear normal.

Visible physical impairments often come to mind when people think of disability. Individuals using a wheelchair or scooter for mobility, reliant on crutches or canes to walk, and supported by braces appear visibly and obviously disabled. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to disguise the visual evidence of physical impairments. For individuals with such disabilities, passing often meant passing in plain sight. In other words, they had to develop strategies that suggested to others that the



individual was not, after all, really disabled. Two of the essays, Daniel J. Wilson's "Passing in the Shadow of FDR: Polio Survivors, Passing, and the Negotiation of Disability" (Chapter 2) and Michael A. Rembis's "Athlete First: A Note on Passing, Disability, and Sport" (Chapter 7), address the ways in which individuals with obvious physical disabilities negotiated their way into the mainstream.

Wilson's "Passing in the Shadow of FDR" explores how polio survivors used the example of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's public image as a recovered and cured polio patient as inspiration for their own efforts to pass as normal. Many polio survivors succeeded to a large extent in passing into the mainstream of American life in the second half of the twentieth century, although the effort was not without psychological and physical consequences. Passing meant many different things to polio survivors. Many first had to convince themselves that they were not disabled, that like the president they could do whatever they wanted. As with FDR, walking—or at least seeming to walk—was often the key to passing successfully, even if that meant walking with obvious braces and crutches. Polio survivors developed a variety of strategies to deflect attention from their withered limbs, unusual gaits, and necessary assistive devices to be accepted as "normal." However, they discovered that their efforts to pass by pushing their bodies and ignoring pain gave rise to post-polio syndrome some thirty to forty years after they had polio. Post-polio syndrome challenged anew their ability to pass and often reawakened psychological issues. These late effects of polio have forced many survivors to renegotiate their relationship to disability and to society, and many have concluded that passing is simply too costly, both physically and psychologically.

Rembis's "Athlete First" deals with the post-World War II rise of disabled athletics first as part of the rehabilitation of injured veterans and then as physical activity available to a much wider range of individuals with mainly physical impairments. Rembis picks up some of the themes developed in Wilson's essay, especially the need to pass in plain sight and be accepted as normal despite obvious disabilities and assistive devices—to be accepted as an athlete first and not simply as a disabled athlete. Rembis argues that these athletes do not need to conceal their impairments to pass if they can approximate social, cultural, and athletic norms in their appearance, behavior, competitiveness, and performance. He focuses most of his essay on two contemporary disabled athletes, Mark Zupan and Aimee Mullins. After an automobile acci-

dent, Zupan became a quadriplegic and played wheelchair rugby at its highest levels, winning the gold medal in the 2008 Paralympic Games. Mullins is a double below-the-knee amputee as the result of a birth defect who pursued a career in track and worked as a fashion model and film actor. Rembis explores how these two individuals negotiate their relationship to their disability and their athletic success. The chapter concludes with thoughts on overcoming and passing that are applicable not only to disabled athletes but to anyone attempting to succeed in today's culture.

Expanding the range of the topic, the chapters by Dea H. Boster, Jeffrey A. Brune, and David Linton examine passing in the context of the removal of disability issues from texts and public discourse, the ways that the advertising of feminine hygiene products has played on notions of disability passing, and slave malingering. Boster's "I Made Up My Mind to Act Both Deaf and Dumb': Displays of Disability and Slave Resistance in the Antebellum American South" (Chapter 5), an account of how slaves used disability to mitigate some of the consequences of slavery, explores how slaves tried to pass as disabled to prevent a sale or modify and lessen their work obligations. She discusses how and why passing as disabled enabled some slaves to assert some control over their bodies and to resist the authority of their masters. As she writes, "Performing disability—a condition normally associated with dependence and powerlessness—and forcing white authority figures to contend with their conditions could allow slaves to achieve a degree of independence and control in many different situations." By taking on the stigmatized condition of disability, these slaves were able to negotiate with their masters an altered status. Boster examines a number of cases from plantation and court records of slaves who feigned illness, often epileptic fits or mental illness, and who in some cases "intentionally disabled themselves as a form of sabotage." Boster's essay insightfully explores the benefits and costs of passing at the nexus of race and disability and raises interesting questions about the stability of these categories of race and disability, especially when they are performed together.

While Boster examines the issue of passing as disabled, Brune studies how the topic of disability passes out of texts and public discourse. "The Multiple Layers of Disability Passing in Life, Literature, and Public Discourse" (Chapter 3) focuses on John Howard Griffin and his famous book *Black Like Me* (1961). Chronicling the author's experience passing

as an African American in the Jim Crow South, the book shaped many white people's views of black civil rights for decades. However, Brune notes that this was not Griffin's first experience with passing. Wounded in World War II, Griffin slowly lost his vision but attempted to pass as sighted for a number of years before embracing an empowered blind identity. Then, unexpectedly, he regained his sight in 1957 and seemed to have left the disabled world behind, just two years before conducting his famous racial experiment. Nonetheless, Brune's reading of *Black Like Me* reveals the ways in which Griffin's earlier experience of disability influenced his writing of the book. Curiously, Griffin avoids the topic of disability that left such a mark on him and his later work. The essay explores how Griffin erased the experience of disability from his text on racial passing and how disability has also passed from subsequent discussions of the work and the author. The chapter concludes with thoughts about how disability becomes a marginalized topic in modern American texts and discourses.

Further expanding the topic of disability passing, Linton's "The Menstrual Masquerade" (Chapter 4) examines how the promotion of modern feminine hygiene products has played on intersecting notions of gender and disability. In a fascinating analysis of the language and imagery of ads for sanitary napkins in the 1920s, Linton shows how companies such as Kotex used notions of disability and passing as nondisabled to educate women to pass as non-menstruators. He then attempts to examine attitudes about menstruation both before and since that era. Exploring further the relationship between gender and disability, Linton concludes with speculation about how current notions of menstruation and passing may be starting to change.

Two of the anthology's chapters focus on the role that institutions, including families, play in disability passing. Kristen C. Harmon's "Growing Up to Become Hearing: Dreams of Passing in Oral Deaf Education" (Chapter 9) focuses on the role that families and deaf educational institutions play in compelling children to pass as normal. Harmon begins with a brief discussion of her own experience going through the "pure oral method" of deaf education and discovering as an adult the limitations of trying to pass for hearing. She focuses on a series of films produced by the Oberkotter Foundation that promote oral deaf education for young deaf children. In her careful study of both the imagery and the scripts of these films, Harmon explores the ways in which they play on the parents' desires for their child and their family to be perceived

as normal—having a child pass as nondisabled becomes a means for the family to pass as normal. What these films do not show, as Harmon points out, are the consequences when the children reach adolescence and adulthood. By analyzing parental roles, Harmon emphasizes that passing is not a singular performance. She also reminds us that where young children are concerned, it is the parents who make the initial decision whether or not their child will attempt to pass.

Another chapter that examines power and institutional interests in relation to passing is Allison C. Carey's "The Sociopolitical Contexts of Passing and Intellectual Disability" (Chapter 8). Carey's broad historical analysis begins with early-twentieth-century eugenic concerns about feeble-mindedness. Fears that "feeble-minded" individuals might pass as normal, marry, and pass on their defective genes led to systems to diagnose, register, sequester, and sometimes sterilize such individuals. After World War II, however, parents and professionals took a different approach. They softened category boundaries and began to develop services and resources to allow individuals with intellectual disabilities to pass into the mainstream of American society. As with Harmon's essay on deaf education, this chapter also explores family involvement in disability passing. Many families sought to reduce the stigma not only for the individual but for the family as well. Carey also discusses recent developments in this history, as disability pride and advocacy have become more prominent since the 1990s even as issues of stigma persist. Self-advocates and allies have argued for a blurring of the lines between abled and disabled, for respecting the individual regardless of his or her impairment. At the same time, the need to be seen as disabled to secure certain rights and benefits has further complicated these issues of passing related to intellectual disability.

Using postmodern theory to delve further into cognitive disabilities, Peta Cox's essay, "Passing as Sane, or How to Get People to Sit Next to You on the Bus" (Chapter 6), draws on theories of performativity and performance to understand sanity and mental illness. Issues of passing are central to how we define and perceive sanity and mental illness, and the complex act of passing, which can either increase or decrease an individual's distress, affects how people experience mental issues. Cox draws on Judith Butler's theories of performativity but also notes the important ways in which the differences between gender and mental illness limit the usefulness of Butler's theories in analyzing passing as (in)sane. Cox interrogates the goals of therapy—whether they are

designed to reduce the actual impairment or to modify the external symptoms so the individual can pass as sane. She also examines how strategies for passing and notions of sanity vary according to other social identities, such as gender, sexuality, class, and race.

In addition to the chapters, the cover art for this volume merits explanation. On the most obvious level, its overlapping and blurred lines offer a literal representation of how passing blurs the lines between disability and normality. Going further, the production of this art adds layers to its significance. While the photograph ostensibly does not appear to be about disability, the photographer, Craig Royal, is blind, which blurs the distinction between disability and nondisability art. Moreover, the very idea of “blind photography” challenges the opposition between blindness and visual art that most people take for granted. On a variety of levels, this image encapsulates the blurred boundaries between disability and normality.

We hope readers will recognize that these essays by no means exhaust the topic and will choose to pursue more studies of disability and passing. As mentioned previously, there is more possibility for integrating race into this discussion. Another topic ripe for study is the exhibition of disability pride, including the adornment of various technologies that serve as disability markers. Various chapters touch on this issue, but none make it their main focus. There are also many time periods, places, and (sub)cultures, as well as disabilities and impairments, that do not appear in these pages.

As the essays in this volume make clear, passing has been and continues to be a complex psychological and physical performance that can only be understood when situated in a particular historical and social context. The issues differ somewhat depending on the disability. Physical impairments require different kinds of decisions and actions from less visible impairments, such as intellectual disabilities, that may be evident only in particular settings. These essays also remind us that while disability passing shares some features with gender and racial passing, it has its own particular characteristics. There is no better example than Boster’s essay, which describes how slaves took on the mantle of disability to mitigate the harshness of racial slavery and even to escape it. Eight essays on disability and passing by no means exhaust the subject, but we hope this anthology demonstrates what is possible through a close study of passing and disability and encourages other scholars to explore the subject further.

## Notes

1. Throughout the anthology, the authors undermine notions of “normal” and “normality” and see them as social constructions. With this understanding, the editors have decided it is not necessary to put quotes around the words every time, although there are cases in which the extra emphasis is warranted.

2. Leading studies of passing include Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996); Gerald Horne, *The Color of Fascism: Lawrence Dennis, Racial Passing, and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States*, annotated ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); James M. O’Toole, *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820–1920* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg, eds., *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Martha A. Sandweiss, *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception across the Color Line* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Gayle Freda Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

3. Thus far, there has been no major, book-length study of disability passing, although one article has received much attention and is referenced often in these chapters: Tobin Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade,” *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 1–22. Other works that address disability passing include Brenda Jo Brueggemann, “On (Almost) Passing,” *College English* 59, no. 6 (1997): 647–660; Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), chap. 1; Ellen Jean Samuels, “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no. 1 (2003): 233–255; Tanya Titchkosky, *Disability, Self, and Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), chaps. 3, 6.

4. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

5. Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability* (London: Routledge, 1999), 17.

6. Those who have made this critique include Gelya Frank, “Beyond Stigma: Visibility and Self-Empowerment for Persons with Congenital Limb Deficiencies,” *Journal of Social Issues* 44, no. 1 (1988): 106; Grace M. Mest, “With a Little Help from Their Friends: Use of Social Support Systems by Persons with Retardation,” *Journal of Social Issues* 44, no. 1 (1988): 117–125; Tanya Titchkosky, “Disability Studies: The Old and the New,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 25, no. 2 (April 2000): 204.

7. Frank, "Beyond Stigma," 97. Others have made the same critique, including Karen Hirsch, "Culture and Disability: The Role of Oral History," *Oral History Review* 22, no. 1 (1995): 10.

8. Linda Schlossberg, "Introduction: Rites of Passing," in Sánchez and Schlossberg, *Passing*, 4.

9. *Ibid.*



## 2 Passing in the Shadow of FDR

### *Polio Survivors, Passing, and the Negotiation of Disability*

DANIEL J. WILSON

**T**HE AMERICAN WRITER and novelist Wilfred Sheed spent many years following his case of polio attempting to disguise the fact that he was disabled. He noted that most individuals with handicaps “find themselves faced as one with the same task,” which is to “make the world, and ourselves, forget for as long and as often as possible that there has ever been anything wrong with us: to be, in other words, ‘great pitchers,’ and not just ‘great one-armed pitchers.’”<sup>1</sup> Some forty years after his illness, when post-polio syndrome created new disabilities, Sheed came to the recognition that his efforts to pass, to conceal his disability all those years, probably had not been as complete as he had convinced himself: “The truth is I was probably always a lot more handicapped than I let on, either to myself or others. My knacks were all geared to the same end, a massive cover-up, a downright Watergate of the nerves and muscles, in order to pass inspection.”<sup>2</sup>

In seeking to “pass inspection,” Sheed, like many polio survivors, sought to emulate Franklin D. Roosevelt, who successfully cultivated the image of a healthy man who had recovered from polio with no significant permanent disability. Roosevelt’s carefully constructed image posed significant challenges for polio survivors. With the aid of advisers and a complicit press, Roosevelt passed as a man recovered from polio who could walk and stand and was thus fit to hold high political office. In fact, FDR walked and stood with great difficulty and spent most of his time in a wheelchair or otherwise sitting. Polio survivors



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