The Art of the Pass

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In this brief position paper, I propose that we should think about obfuscation in relation to the social and political practice of *passing*. By passing, I refer to situations where a person who belongs to one social group is accepted as a member of another social group, for instance when mixed-race or light-skinned individuals pass for white, queer folks pass for heterosexual, or transgender people pass for cisgender. To take Brooke Kroeger's (2005: 7-8) definition, passing is "when people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be."

Importantly, passing moves upwards, i.e., from a more marginalized social group to the dominant social group. Because of this asymmetry, passing, like obfuscation, is a "weapon of the weak" within a world where the passer is disadvantaged from the start (Scott 1985). For this reason, blackface and other acts of racial appropriation do not fall under the umbrella of passing.

Passing is a performance that relies upon popular stereotypes about race, gender, and sexuality. The passer exploits features of the dominant group, adopting their modes of speaking, behavior, and dress, in order to camouflage in plain sight. If we define obfuscation as the "production of noise modeled on an existing signal in order to make data or information more ambiguous," then passing is a quintessential form of obfuscation – and one with deep historical roots. By looking into the history of passing (Rottenberg 2003, Thaggert 2005, Smith-Pryor 2009), we can better appreciate the types of obfuscation that precede computing and digital surveillance.

Recent work from feminist scholars of surveillance has highlighted how surveillance is a sociopolitical practice that targets racial minorities and other populations who are at the peripheries of society (Browne 2015, Bridges 2017, Eubanks 2018). It is not surprising that the social groups who have been most closely scrutinized have developed practices to evade surveillance. For this reason, it is important for us to consider passing in our discussions of obfuscation. In what follows, I discuss some of the academic literature on passing and sketch out a few ways that the concept of passing can help us think about obfuscation. I regard these as jumping-off points for further discussion in the workshop, rather than fully formed arguments.

Scholars who have studied passing among immigrant communities illustrate how passing is often a strategy of last resort, a limited means of social mobility and survival (Coutin 2003, Pegler-Gordon 2006, Yeh 2018, Garcia 2019). For instance, undocumented immigrants in the U.S. may "adopt novel behaviors, consume and display particular material things, and cultivate alternative outlooks as they attempt to mask "illegality" — their Mexican traits and often rural origins — and pass as nonthreatening, nonsuspicious US-born Americans" (Garcia 2019: 6). Though undocumented Mexican immigrants may not be able to "pass" along racial lines, Garcia recounts how they try to appear as if they are members of a different social class and immigration status. Strategies of passing may include the clothing they wear, the car they drive, the language they use, and even the way they walk. Passing can therefore be thought of as a complex bundle of techniques, knowledges and practices.

Ethnographic accounts of passing in immigrant communities have deftly illustrated the *agency* of the passer, who must remain hyperaware of social cues, legal systems, and political structures. However, as anthropologist Susan Coutin (2003: 12) cautions, we must be careful not to "equate agency with resistance, independence, sovereignty, escape from social control, and so forth." In other words, Coutin and her colleagues insist that tales of immigrant agency too often celebrate the ingenuity of their subjects in a way that underestimates the futility of this type of action when the opponent is a hegemonic system (c.f. De Genova 2002). While gloomy, I believe this more pessimistic stance should also be taken into account in any discussions about obfuscation.

Relatedly, a recurring debate in the sociological literature on passing asks whether or not passing is a subversive practice (Lingel 2009). On one hand, the passer successfully manipulates the codes of the dominant class for their own benefit. For this reason, passing has often been thought of as a form of transgression, a way of beating the system and potentially destabilizing it in the process. However, passing also reinforces ideas about social difference because it draws upon popular stereotypes about how certain groups look and/or behave. As social theorist Sarah Ahmed (2013: 125) argues, passing is "implicated in the very discourse around tellable differences" because the fact that some are able to pass reifies the premise that there are certain markers and signs that can be read in order to discern a person's "true" identity. This debate may illuminate similar tensions that are inherent to the various practices and techniques of obfuscation. In what ways might obfuscation prop up the very systems it aims to dismantle?

We must also acknowledge that passing – and obfuscation – often rely upon a relative amount of privilege. Not everyone is able to pass. Certain bodies are able to flirt with the boundaries between social categories, while others may be too dark-skinned or possess too many features coded as masculine, thereby foreclosing the possibility of passing. Similarly, forms of obfuscation like privacy-preserving software are available only to those with certain means and technical knowledge. Given these limitations, can obfuscation ever be a truly populist practice?

Finally, in her discussion of "gaydar" and queer people passing for straight, literary scholar Amy Robinson (1994) contrasts passing with drag. Drag refers to the flamboyant performance of gender, typified by drag queens and kings who play with exaggerated forms of gender expression on stage. Drag is a form of spectacle, it "calls attention to the act of impersonation and foregrounds its status as imitation" (Robinson 1994: 727). I believe there is a rich discussion to be had about obfuscation through the juxtaposition of passing and drag, both of which are forms of disguise, albeit with different intents and outcomes. We might think of drag as a matter of principle – a bold refutation of gender norms – whereas passing is often a matter of survival. As Robinson (1994: 727) notes, "the exact outfit that wins first prize at a drag ball may, if read as passing on the street, facilitate a celebrated drag queen's safe passage home."

Many techniques of evasion – for instance, a Guy Fawkes mask or CV dazzle makeup – announce their intent at the same time as they cover the wearer's true identity. We may not know who is under the mask, but we can be certain that whoever is wearing it is trying to hide. Passing, however, camouflages the existence of the disguise; in order to be successful, no one can know that the passer is attempting to pass. This leads us to think about the relative importance of *concealing the act of concealment*, a distinction that may help us further classify and understand acts of obfuscation.

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