BEYOND THE BINARIES: PASSING AS CISGENDER IN MIDDLESEX, TRUMPET, AND REDEFINING REALNESS

Hillary Weiss

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Committee:

Kimberly Coates, Advisor

Bill Albertini
ABSTRACT

Kimberly Coates, Advisor

Today, the concept of passing for trans* individuals is often reduced down to a "good/bad" dichotomy. Passing can be used for safety and can reaffirm a trans* individuals’ identity. However, passing can be seen as deceptive or hiding one’s true identity. The history of passing contributes to this supposed deception: since passing as a different race or sexual orientation signifies a performance, some believe passing for trans* individuals means passing as a man or woman. Because of this assumption, I use the phrase “passing as cisgender” to challenge the idea that a cis person is real and a trans* person is unreal. Using Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity as a basis, this project attempts to break down the concept of a real gender by examining trans* characters who can pass as cisgender. I analyze three different texts—Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*, Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet*, and Janet Mock’s *Redefining Realness*—and their trans* character’s relation to passing as cisgender. In the first chapter, I refute the typical analyses of *Middlesex* and explain how Cal uses passing as cis as a strategy for obtaining agency. In the second chapter, I examine how the “double narrative” of passing provides Joss Moody with an alternative narrative, but the medical and legal communities within *Trumpet* attempt to rewrite this alternative narrative. In the final chapter, I argue that Janet Mock, who can pass as cisgender, chooses not to “pass” and shares her story. This provides an alternative to passing, even though this is only available for a small group of trans* individuals. All of these chapters reveal that passing is much more complex than its standard notions.
For those trans* individuals who can pass as cisgender
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Passing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Chapters</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE. &quot;I OPERATE IN SOCIETY AS A MAN&quot;: PASSING AS AGENCY IN MIDDLESEX</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO. &quot;HE HAS MADE US ALL UNREAL&quot;: THE &quot;DOUBLE NARRATIVE&quot; AND PASSING AS CIS IN JACKIE KAY’S TRUMPET</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE. REDEFINING “REALNESS”: AN ALTERNATIVE TO PASSING AS CISGENDER</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In one video of a six video series, Janet Mock tackles the issues she has with passing. She states:

I have such a complicated relationship with the concept of passing, period. Not even applying it to my own life…the idea that to pass means that you’re passing as something you’re not. Passing comes off as if you’re actively—right? because it’s a verb—actively engaging in some kind of trickery or deception. And so that’s where I get irritated with passing because anytime that I walk on the street, my gender is visible. I am a woman, people see me and take me as a woman. And that is not passing, that is me just being. But once that I disclose that I am trans, things change. And then I become an oddity, I become an object, something that is objectified and gawked over, and my humanity and womanhood is then checked and put into question. So I can just imagine someone who does not have the conditional privilege of passing, having to deal with that all the time…

Although Mock acknowledges she has the ability to “pass,” or to be read as a woman, she believes there are issues with the concept of “passing” as a whole. Accusing trans individuals of “passing” suggests, as Mock says, that these trans individuals are tricking others. Historically, to “pass” means to act as something you are not; “passing” is perceived as a performance. Therefore, Mock believes that when people describe a trans person as “passing,” they are performing their identity, and their identity is no longer real. In addition, when a trans woman “passes” but then reveals she is trans, she is no longer seen as human. She is objectified. She is asked invasive questions that interviewers normally ask trans women, such as, “Do you have a vagina?” The answer to this question will supposedly prove her womanhood and allow her to
still be viewed as a woman (although a lesser woman because she is trans). I agree with Mock that there are true issues with the concept of “passing” for trans individuals, especially concerning the realness of their identity. But “passing” is much more complex than its negative connotations; “passing” is not simply harmful. This project will not simply be examining the issues with “passing,” but also the ways in which it can be useful.

In this video, Mock does not consider the ways that passing as cis can be useful or even necessary (she does, however, talk about how passing can be useful in her memoir). Since transphobia still clearly exists within our world today (transgender bathroom laws, the murders of trans individuals, and “trans bashing” prove this), passing as cis can be used to escape verbal and physical violence. Those who cannot (always) pass as cisgender may face violence, anywhere from misgendering to murder. For instance, CeCe McDonald, a young, black trans woman from Minneapolis, faced both verbal and physical violence because she is a black trans woman. Men would yell out obscenities such as: “That’s a man!” and she needed to “go back to Africa” to both McDonald and her group. When McDonald finally asked for some respect from these men, violence broke out between McDonald’s group and the group who harassed them. During the scuffle, one man charged toward McDonald. Knowing he aimed to kill her, she stabbed him. There are many accounts like McDonald’s story, but some of these stories end in the trans person’s death, not the attacker’s death. Those trans individuals like McDonald are in danger when they refuse to pass as cisgender.

However, in this project, my goal is to challenge typical notions of “passing” with stories of those trans individuals who have the privilege to pass as cis. Instead of viewing “passing” as simply a performance or a safety strategy, I will delve into other ways that passing as cisgender is used and how passing is much more complicated than it appears or how others normally
understand it. I will attempt to answer questions such as: how can “passing” be useful during one’s life? Can “passing” be pleasurable during one’s life, and then harmful after one’s death? And for those who do not wish to pass as cisgender, what is an alternative? The answers to these questions, found in the chapters, will better help scholars and trans individuals understand that passing as cisgender is different for all individuals, and passing should not simply be reduced down to “good” or “bad.” In this project, I analyze three different texts—Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*, Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet*, and Janet Mock’s *Redefining Realness*—and their trans character’s relation to passing as cisgender. In these chapters, I reveal how passing as cis can be a strategy for obtaining agency, a way to eventually lose that agency (in one’s death), and a basis to realize there needs to be other options besides passing for people who can pass as cisgender.

**Terms**

Some of the terms in this project are important and may not be substituted, like “passing as cisgender.” In this project, I will often use “passing as cisgender” instead of simply “passing” for two reasons: firstly, “passing as cisgender” shows that these individuals can pass as cisgender, not as women or men. This term does not reproduce the transphobic idea that trans individuals are not “real” women and men: it challenges the idea of any real gender. Instead, passing as cisgender means that these individuals reject their trans identity. Secondly, the term “passing as cisgender” focuses strictly on gender, while “passing” could mean race, gender, and/or sexuality. However, there will be instances, especially in my third chapter, where I use “passing” (with quotation marks) because this is the term Janet Mock uses. I will also use “passing” with quotation marks to emphasize the idea that “passing” is thought of as “passing”: that is, being deceitful. In addition, throughout this project, I will often use singular “they” to show when a character’s gender is not clear or does not wish to be clear, and to substitute his/her
at times. I also will be using trans* (from now on in this project, unless the people that I discuss do not identify as “trans” with the asterisk, or unless it is a direct quote using “trans” without an asterisk) as the umbrella term that includes people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth (including transgender, “transsexual,” intersex, and other non-conforming gender identities). By using the asterisk after the word “trans,” I do not limit my analysis or reduce these trans* individuals to simply the labels of “transgender man” or “transgender woman.” As Susan Stryker points out, people have recently used the term “transgender” to refer only to those “who identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth, and to use other terms for people who seek to resist their birth-assigned gender without abandoning it, or who seek to create some kind of new gender location” (19). Though the majority of scholars use “transgender” as an umbrella term, I agree that “transgender” often only conjures up images of transgender men and women. Using “trans*” instead of “transgender” opens up the possibility to read these characters as something more. For characters like Cal(lie), using “trans*” to label them is helpful because they are intersex as well as a transgender man. This term allows character’s identities to go beyond the boundaries of man or woman, transgender or cisgender, or any other supposed binaries. While the term trans* is useful, I will use the term “intersex” (and the historical “hermaphrodite”) in my first chapter to highlight how intersexuality is often erased, even within the trans* category. Although this chapter does not focus on reading Cal as intersex, it is important to highlight the differences beneath the trans* umbrella so that identities do not get erased (especially intersex identities that are normally erased by the medical community).
Traditionally, the term “passing” recalls a history connected to hiding one’s race or sexuality and passing as the privileged race or sexuality. Black individuals passed as white during the 18th century in the U.S. in order to escape slavery. To escape discrimination and obtain economic opportunities, black individuals would pass as white during the Jim Crow era. Professor Cheryl I. Harris recalls how her grandmother passed for white to get a job in a Chicago department store in the 1930s (Kennedy 11). But passing as white was not as simple as claiming whiteness. Passing as white often meant one had to erase at least parts of their past life: ignore their family and friends and adopt white ways of living, such as wearing “white” clothes and speaking “white.”\(^1\) If black individuals wished to pass as white, they must be understood and read as white by others. Similarly, in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer communities, passing as straight means individuals also must change their life story and take on “straighter” characteristics in order to be read as straight. As we can see, racial and sexual passing can be active—in order for people to “pass,” they must do certain things, like avoid discussing their past.\(^2\) In addition, people who pass as a different race or sexuality are passing as something they are not. Although a queer individual can pass as straight, this does not mean this queer individual identifies as straight or even practices heterosexuality. Many of the characteristics of racial and sexual orientation passing have transferred to gender passing. Like racial and sexual orientation passing, passing as cisgender means adopting cisgender ways of living and possibly rejecting past family and friends (as we will see in Chapter 2 of this project). Also, “passing” for trans* individuals can be seen as inauthentic. Therefore, because of the history of passing, others assume that any kind of “passing” is performative (or unreal) and deceptive.

Trans* individuals who “pass” are seen as deceptive because their identities—both trans* identity and passing identity—are seen as unreal. Since passing as a different race or sexual
orientation signifies a performance. “Passing” for trans* individuals is seen as unreal. This performance is often equated with passing as a woman or man instead of passing as cisgender. As Janet Mock says in her video about passing, when someone compliments or accuses trans* individuals of “passing as a woman or a man,” this rhetoric contradicts trans* individuals’ identities. Saying one is “passing” means they are no longer seen as authentic women or men by others. Trans individuals, as Patricia Elliot points out, challenge notions of the “authenticity” of gender in many different ways. “Passing” or not “passing,” trans* individuals challenge the medical, legal, and some social definitions of gender. Medical, legal, and social definitions of gender understand cisgender to be the only authentic gender. Since trans* individuals challenge these systems’ definition, trans* individuals are often feared, pathologized, and dismissed by these communities and others. Trans* individuals who can pass as cisgender may not face as much of this kind of transphobia, but I maintain that they also challenge the “authenticity” of gender. In other words, I believe individuals who pass as cisgender challenge the overarching belief (particularly held by medical and legal communities) that gender is stable, essentialist, and binary. Trans* individuals (who can pass as cis) transgress a boundary: this boundary is not from man to woman, woman to man, or—after crossing the boundary—landing somewhere in between these two labels, like many queer and feminist theorists have written about. Instead, they move from being trans* to being read as cisgender. Those who can pass as cisgender are read as “real” women and men, and this is why others may believe trans* individuals as deceptive: people read them as cisgender, or “real” when they are really trans*, or “not real.” If the “passing” trans* person is ever found out to be trans*, their authenticity is questioned and they may be met with violence. However, in the moment these trans* individuals pass as cisgender, they are “real.” Here again, using the phrase “passing as cisgender” is important: I do
not wish to prize cisgender identity or deem them as “more real;” instead, my project attempts to break down the concept of “real” by analyzing trans* individuals who can pass as cis. When a trans* individual is read as cisgender, they erode the definitions of “real” and “unreal,” leaving all individuals—cis and trans*—somewhere in between or outside of real and unreal.

In addition to certain communities (especially medical and legal communities) seeing “passing” as deceptive, other trans* activists and scholars believe “passing” means hiding one’s trans-ness. Janet Mock, as well as Leslie Feinberg and Viviane Namaste, write about “passing” as hiding one’s trans* identity. Namaste insists, “Passing is about presenting yourself as a ‘real’ woman or ‘real’ man—that is, as an individual whose ‘original’ sex is never suspected. Passing means hiding the fact that you are transsexual and/or transgendered” (144). While Namaste does not make her opinion on “passing” clear, she highlights an important part of “passing”: trans* individuals who “pass” hide their trans* identity, meaning, any trans-ness that may be read on their body is erased. Moreover, Feinberg writes: “Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgender people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats of violence” (150). In other words, Feinberg claims that “passing” may be useful, but “passing” also hides one’s trans* identity purposely because of violence. Although Feinberg acknowledges the issue of violence, zie does not believe that “passing” can be harmful for trans* individuals. Both Namaste and Feinberg emphasize how “passing” means hiding one’s trans-ness, but they do not explore any other reasons besides safety for why individuals may pass as cisgender.

However, as Christine Overall and Karin Sellberg assert, passing is not “inherently wrong” (211). In fact, Overall and Sellberg argue that passing is seen as deceitful because others assume that these trans* individuals are misrepresenting their own identity. But the trans*
person, “far from being deceitful, her/his gender aspirations are in fact quite public; s/he is manifesting the gender with which s/he identifies” (207). Those who think that gender identity is the same as birth-assigned sex will often claim that a trans person who passes as cisgender is deceitful because that person hides the gender they were declared at birth, and also hides their trans-ness. However, as Overall and Sellberg point out, that same trans person is presenting themselves in the gender with which they identify. I agree with Overall and Sellberg that passing is not fundamentally deceitful. These authors open up the possibility for trans* individuals who “pass” to be seen as truthful and real. My project builds off of Overall and Sellberg’s work to show that “passing” is not “bad.” Instead, passing as cisgender is something that makes us question the connection and the differences between cisgender and trans* identities.

Theory

In this project, I use Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity as a basis for understanding passing as cisgender. Butler argues that gender is not something natural or essentialist, but is a performance. But the performance is “not contrasted with the real, but constitutes a reality” (527). In other words, gender is not natural or immutable. Rather, gender comes to feel like something “true” about ourselves through the repetition of its performance. If we apply this to the concept of passing as cisgender, we understand that those trans* individuals who “pass” are performing; in order to be read as a cisgender woman, for instance, a trans* woman must perform femininity. Performing, however, does not mean their identities are unreal. In fact, because a trans woman performs femininity and is able to be read as cisgender, her cisgender-ness appears real. Therefore, she exposes the constructed nature of all gender. Butler’s theory of gender performativity reveals that everyone’s gender—cisgender and trans*—is a performance. This performance is made up of certain acts that make up one’s perceived gender.
These acts either “conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way” (527-528). Trans* individuals who “pass” normally conform to the expected gender identity traits and perform acts that correspond to this norm so that they can be read as cisgender. For instance, if a trans* woman wishes to be read as a cisgender woman, she may dress in a culturally-read feminine way. But since gender is, as Butler says, a constant doing, in order for the trans* woman to continue to be read as cisgender, she must continue dressing in a feminine way. In this moment, this trans* woman is cisgender to the people who read her as cisgender, and this performance allows her to be read as a (cisgender) woman.

Although Butler’s gender performativity is an important foundation to understand “passing,” at the end of her piece, she calls for, as many queer theorists do, “gender trouble” (or troubling gender categories) through gender performativity. Queer theories, like Butler’s gender performativity, often prize unintelligibly-gendered individuals over those who wish to be intelligible. Therefore, trans* individuals, especially those who pass or can pass as cisgender, seem to clash with “queer” identities and queer theory. E. MacDonald highlights how queer analyses often present transgender identity as play or strategy, often at the expense of real lives (4). Instead of reading trans* individuals as more stable identities, some theorists insist upon reading their experiences as a way to break down and blur the gender binary. However, some of these trans* individuals, like the ones that I analyze, wish to be read strictly as a man or a woman (within the gender binary). In a recent interview, Butler acknowledges the tension between some trans* identities and queerness in a recent interview: “If ‘queer’ means that we are generally people whose gender and sexuality is ‘unfixed’ then what room is there in a queer movement for those who understand themselves as requiring – and wanting – a clear gender category within a binary frame?” (Ahmed 9). Since queer is such an amorphous term that is supposed to include
anyone whose gender and sexuality is flexible, then how do we account for those who wish to have their gender and sexuality more stable, like some trans* individuals? Can trans* individuals who can pass as cisgender be considered queer at all? Although Butler does not give us an answer to her thoughtful question, Maria Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg offer a way to understand how trans* identities that may seem normative can be considered queer. Sanchez and Schlossberg argue that there is something fundamentally queer about passing itself because “passing’s ability to be both playful and serious asks us to reconsider our interpretive strategies and forces our most cherished fantasies of identity to self-deconstruct” (3-4). In other words, “passing” is queer because it can be both desirable and necessary, and this forces scholars to look at how “passing” actually deconstructs so-called stable identities that “pass.” In this project, I build off of Sanchez and Schlossberg’s notion of “passing” being queer, and I attempt to answer Butler’s question within this project by looking at trans* individuals who wish for their identities to be more stable (even though their identities are not necessarily more stable). Specifically, the characters I analyze within this project have gender identities that have, as Eve Sedgwick says, “gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” that signify queerness (8-9). Although Cal in *Middlesex* chooses to pass as a cisgender man, he also identifies as intersex, but only to readers and in a peep show. Cal also chooses to pass as a cisgender man when the medical community clearly wants him to pass as a cisgender girl. The two competing narratives in *Trumpet* display a dissonance between how Joss lived his life and how the medical community wishes to label him. Both of these novels clearly display passing as cisgender as nuanced and problematic, but also as somewhat desirable. Passing as cisgender was the character’s ultimate goal in these novels. On the other hand, Janet Mock’s goal is not to simply pass as cisgender even though she can. If we consider how the other characters that I
analyze want to pass (just like some trans* communities’ ultimate goal is to pass), then we can read Mock’s desires to not pass as queer. Mock’s memoir shows that although she has gender confirmation surgery and can pass as cisgender, she does not wish to hide her trans* identity, and instead wishes to tell her “truth.” Here, there is a gap between how people may read Mock (as a cis woman) and how Mock identifies (as a trans* woman). Her identity may seem more stable because she always identifies as a trans* woman, but when Mock is read as a cisgender woman, her trans* identity is inconsistent. When trans* individuals pass as cisgender, there is a clear gap between the trans* identity and the cisgender-ness. These gaps suggest that not only passing as cis is queer, but “passing” trans* individuals themselves can be considered queer. Although trans* individuals who pass as cisgender may not cause “gender trouble” by their appearance, they cause “(cis)gender trouble” by passing as cisgender: these individuals challenge the boundary between trans* and cisgender. For trans* individuals like Janet Mock who do not wish to pass but can be read as cisgender, this may be a way for them to use the term or identify as “queer.” However, I would like to caution those who use “queer” to label or describe all trans* individuals because they may not want to identify as queer; individuals like Cal and Joss may not have wanted to identify as queer. Instead, scholars should read these individuals through a queer lens. If we read trans* individuals who can pass as cis through a queer lens, this lends us a more complex identity than their so-called normative identity, and does not overlook how these individuals live their lives.

Overview of Chapters

Each of my chapters in this project take on a different perspective of passing as cisgender. As I mention above, passing as cisgender may be understood as queer because of the gap between how the trans* individual is (they are trans*) and how the trans* individual is read.
However, each of these texts cover different ground. These texts also show dissonances between the character’s self-perception and how other people read their identity (in chapters 1 and 3) and battling narratives (chapter 2).

The first chapter of this project analyzes Cal in *Middlesex* as a trans* character who passes as a cisgender man. Most interpretations of Cal by other scholars cast him as either a failed intersex character or as a character who reifies the gender binary because he chooses to live as male because of his “male brain.” However, the key, I argue, is that Cal actively chooses to pass as a cisgender man against the medical community’s wishes. Reading Cal as trans* person who passes as cis disrupts normative interpretations of Cal. This reading allows us to see how Cal’s “passing” is a choice and how, through “passing,” Cal obtains agency.

In the second chapter, I examine Jackie Kay’s novel *Trumpet*. Within this novel, there is a “double narrative” that occurs because Joss passes as a cisgender man for most of his life. One narrative is how Joss lived his life as well as how his family remembers him. The other narrative is told by the medical community and biographer Sophie Stones and attempts to rewrite Joss as a woman. These two narratives obviously clash, and by the end of the novel, there is no clear winner. However, it is clear that after Joss dies, his true identity as Joss is threatened, and the people closest to him are punished. Although Joss is able to pass as a cis man until he dies, both Joss and his family lose agency and face punishment because of “passing.”

Finally, in the third chapter, I use Janet Mock’s memoir *Redefining Realness* to show an alternative to “passing” (for those trans* individuals who can pass as cis). I argue that Mock’s definition of “realness” challenges the typical notions of “passing.” The term “realness” (as opposed to “passing”) provides a space for trans* individuals to share their stories instead of hiding their trans* identity. However, “realness” falls into the trap that typical definitions of
“passing” does: for those who may not embody “realness” to others, they are seen as “unreal.”

Nevertheless, “realness” provides a way for people to question the cisgender norm.
Sometimes, such as in my third chapter, I will use the term “transsexual” to clarify that I am discussing specifically trans* women who had surgery and then had a biography written about them, discussing their surgery.

However, passing can also be inadvertent.

As J. Jack Halberstam writes in “Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography,” trans stories written or made by cisgender writers, biographers, or film makers are represented in three ways: stabilized, rationalized, and trivialized (21). Readers or viewers see trans* narratives as strange or pathological (stabilized), they find reasonable explanations for being trans*, or they see trans* narratives as having no actual effect on gender normativity (trivialized).

A good example of a “passing” trans* person who was found out to be trans* is Brandon Teena. After Brandon went to jail for forging checks and was found out to be in the female section of the jail, his alleged murderers, Tom Nissen and John Lotter found out he was trans*. Shortly after Brandon got out of jail, Nissen and Lotter forced him to remove his pants to “prove” his masculinity. Both men assaulted and raped Brandon. Undoubtedly, these attacks are not only because Brandon was trans*, but also because he passed as a cisgender man.

Feinberg uses the pronouns “zie” and “hir.”
CHAPTER ONE. “I OPERATE IN SOCIETY AS A MAN”: PASSING AS AGENCY IN MIDDLESEX


“I had to.”

“Don’t you think it would have been easier just to stay the way you were?”

I lifted my face and looked into my mother’s eyes. And I told her: “This is the way I was.” (520).

This intimate moment between Cal and his mother in Middlesex can be read in a few different ways. The first way (and the way that scholars normally read Middlesex) is that Cal reifies the gender binary and lives up to the medical definition of sex. When Cal says “this is the way I was,” this is because of his male genes or, as he says, his “male brain” (19). Because of this supposed concrete male-ness, Callie transitions to Cal. By saying “This is the way I was,” Cal confirms that he was always a boy, erases any nuances of his gender, and erases his intersexuality. The novel cannot imagine a “middle” gender, as the title of the novel implies.

This reading of the text, however, ignores the agency that Cal assumes throughout Middlesex. Therefore, while Middlesex is normally read as a novel that upholds normative ideals, I argue that Cal should be read as a trans* character who chooses to pass as cisgender. I use Susan Stryker’s definition of “trans” in this chapter: a trans* person is one who does not feel a congruence between their sex and gender identity (13). Stryker proposes that a trans* individual feels dissonance with the sex they are declared at birth and their gender identity (or the gender category they feel they belong to). Therefore, these trans* individuals transition from the sex they were declared at birth to the gender they wish to be. Some trans* individuals like Cal can pass—or be read—as cisgender by others. Passing for trans* individuals is often seen as
deceptive to both anti-trans* groups and trans*-friendly groups alike: to anti-trans* groups, passing is seen as covering up their “real” gender (that is, the sex they were declared at birth); to trans*-friendly groups, passing is seen as covering up their trans* identity, which only encourages more stigma of trans* identities. However, in this chapter, I reject these definitions of passing. Instead, I suggest that passing can be a type of agency for Cal. I define “agency” in this chapter in two different ways: firstly, agency is when Cal is able to act independently; and secondly, as bell hooks says, agency is “the ability to act in one’s best interest” (Gardiner 6).

Reading Cal as trans* person who passes as cis disrupts normative interpretations of Cal. By reading Cal as trans*, we can see that Cal’s passing is a choice made against certain communities in the novel, specifically the medical community. Because Cal can pass as cisgender, Cal obtains and asserts his own agency.

*Middlesex* essentially covers three generations of the Stephanides family in order to explain how Cal(lie) was born intersex and why Cal lives his life the way he does. Cal(lie)’s grandparents, Lefty and Desdemona Stephanides, are brother and sister who migrated to the United States during the Great Fire of Smyrna in Greece. While still in Greece, Lefty and Desdemona begin a romantic relationship, and as Lefty and Desdemona leave Greece for the U.S., they claim they are married. When they arrive, they stay with their cousin Sourmelina and her husband Jimmy Zizmo. By chance, Desdemona and Sourmelina end up pregnant at the same time. Desdemona gives birth to a boy, Milton, and Sourmelina a girl, Theodora, or Tessie. Milton and Tessie, Cal(lie)’s parents, end up marrying and have Callie. Within the story, Cal(lie) explains how a 5-alpha-reductase deficiency (an intersex gene) cause Cal(lie) to be born with female characteristics and a vagina, even though Cal(lie) has male genes. In the novel, Cal clearly links his family’s incest with the intersex gene.
Although Eugenides allows Cal(lie) to tell readers about Cal(lie)’s intersexuality, some scholars claim that intersexuality is exploited within the novel. The medical definition of “intersex” is, in Anne Fausto-Sterling’s words, “a state of medical emergency” (45). Doctors must take action right away because this baby must undoubtedly be declared “boy” or “girl”—one or the other—before the family leaves the hospital. Babies cannot be intersex. As I will discuss further later, the medical community within Eugenides’ novel echoes Fausto-Sterling’s definition of intersex. Some scholars claim that the novel as a whole presents how intersexuality is “medical emergency.” Sarah Graham asserts that Middlesex shows the exploitation of intersex individuals, such as how the medical community treats Cal(lie), but the novel is also complicit in this exploitation. Specifically, Graham traces the use of mythology in Middlesex to demonstrate how intersexuality is associated with punishment and freakery. Cal and his family, according to Graham, are essentially punished for the past incestuous relationships; because Cal was born intersex, and people perceive intersex as abnormal and therefore “bad” (just like incestuous relationships), the Stephanides family is punished. Another example Graham touches on is the scene at the peep show. The peep show in the story, Graham argues, further exploits intersex people by portraying them as “freaks” and only for sexual pleasure. Later, I will address the peep show, but instead of reading it as Cal the intersex person being exploited, I claim that Cal has paradoxical agency within the peep show. To Graham, though, Cal as an intersex person does not have any agency within the peep show or in many places in the novel. Graham briefly acknowledges that Cal is allowed to tell his own story, which challenges how intersexuality is normally silenced. But Graham ultimately claims that the recurring ideas of myths and enfreakment counter and even overshadow Cal’s voice in the story (13). While I agree with Graham that the novel uncovers and, at times, contributes to Cal’s mistreatment (the word
“exploit,” I feel, is too harsh of a word, especially since Cal is able to voice his fear, shame, and
desires), I maintain that Cal’s voice in the story is important. Cal is allowed to speak for himself,
recount his life, and he also gets to critique other people’s ideas.

Still, many other scholars have read *Middlesex* as a text that preserves and favors a
normative identity, and understandably so. Cal states: “…I never felt out of place being a girl. I
still don’t feel entirely at home among men. Desire made me cross over to the other side, desire
and the facticity of my body” (479). In this instance, it seems as though Cal(lie) transitioned to
Cal because of their male genetics and their sexual desire for women. Indeed, Rachel Carroll
argues that *Middlesex* upholds a binary logic of being “one thing and then the other,” meaning
Callie is first raised as a girl, but then becomes a man (193). Cal(lie) never, Carroll claims,
experiments with their gender. Instead, the novel portrays Callie one moment, and all of a
sudden, there is Cal. Though I agree that the novel does not show Cal(lie) experimenting with
their gender, I contend there is a short transition period from Callie to Cal. Right before Cal(lie)
gets their hair cut after running away, there is a moment when Cal(lie) looks in the mirror and
thinks, “I refuse to return Calliope’s gaze any longer” (442). Although Cal(lie) refers to
themselves as Calliope, Calliope is also wearing a man’s suit. This scene does not show Cal
experimenting or identifying as intersex, but instead shows Callie transitioning into Cal. This
transition proves that Callie does not go immediately from Callie to Cal. This transition also
signifies as trans* identity, which is not coded as normative. However, Morgan Holmes argues
that the novel promotes heteronormativity because Callie transitions into Cal. Holmes’ article
claims Callie’s lesbianism is erased within the novel. Holmes writes scathingly, “Cal/iope
is…not an especially powerful character and the novel not especially new, revolutionary or
useful, but just a retrenchant heterosexist politic” (230). When Callie transitions to Cal, female
desire for other woman disappears. Now, instead of Callie, a girl, desiring women, Cal, a man, desires woman, and because Cal believes “Cal” has always existed within Callie, this recreates the same heteronormative narrative we have seen time and again. As Holmes highlights, while Callie’s transition to Cal helps Cal(lie) escape surgery, the transition also accepts patriarchal desire and secures heteronormativity (227). Since Cal ends up living as a straight man despite his past, Holmes claim that Middlesex maintains a normative identity. Although Carroll and Holmes make forceful arguments, I do not wish to read Cal as simply upholding the gender binary or as erasing Callie’s lesbianism. I will read Cal as a (trans*) man—what he wishes to be read as.

Other scholars have read Cal as a man, but they have not acknowledged Cal’s agency. Merton Lee reads Cal as a heterosexual man, but he suggests that because Cal ends up a “stable, happy, heterosexual male,” the novel is “inoffensive” (45). Lee expands on this idea, and argues that Middlesex is a “safe” story because Cal “deploys the rhetoric of objective science…in order to prove that he is a man” (40). In other words, because Cal uses science to support his transition from Callie to Cal, the novel is, as Lee and Holmes argue, not revolutionary. Lee asserts that, overall, the novel does not provide us a new way to view sex or gender. There are, of course, threats to Cal’s normative identity, but these are washed away by the end of the novel. At the very end of the novel, Cal narrates how he is able to uphold a Greek tradition of standing in the doorway so that a dead spirit cannot re-enter the house because he is now a man. “It was always a man who did this [tradition], and now I qualified” (529). Lee reads this Greek tradition affirming Cal’s manhood.² This affirmation of Cal’s manhood by the Greek tradition (as well as science) seems like Cal was meant to be man or was always male, and this, Lee argues, is what makes the novel palatable for more conservative audiences. But if we read Cal as a trans* character who happens to desires to pass as a cisgender man, it should not matter the reason why
Cal wants to live as a man. The fact that he chooses to live as a man, I claim, is more important than the reasons why he chooses to live as a man.

Though Carroll, Holmes, Graham, and Lee read *Middlesex* as a novel that promotes normative identity by the end, Stephanie Hsu refuses to read Cal as simply a character who reinforces the gender binary. Instead, unlike other scholars, Hsu reads Cal as an intersex character who passes as a man. Passing as a man, Hsu argues, gives Cal a way to live as intersex. Hsu states, “By portraying stealth as an alternative strategy for intersex survival, Eugenides's narrative in some sense heeds biopower's imperative to focus on the optimal conditions for human—rather than a specific identity group's—existence” (93). Cal may not tell people he is intersex, but passing as a cisgender man, or “stealth,” is a way for Cal to exist in the world. This strategy may not do anything for the intersex community as a whole. But Hsu reads passing as cis as a way for intersex individuals like Cal to exist. In this chapter, I build on Hsu’s argument: like Hsu, I believe passing as a cisgender man is a way for Cal to exist in the world. But unlike Hsu, I read Cal as a trans* character who transitions from Callie to Cal.

Like most other scholars (besides Hsu), our first instinct may be to read Cal(lie) compared to a normative standard. However, there are a few reasons why we should not read Cal(lie) against a normative standard or the gender binary. Firstly, Cal(lie)’s sex and gender identity suggests a queerness itself. As Eve Sedgwick argues, “‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (8-9). Cal’s gender identity seem normative. However, after the transition to Cal, Cal passes as a cisgender man but also identifies as intersex within the novel. But Cal does not identify as an intersex man to others; Cal identifies as intersex only
within the book. He tells readers, “A word on my shame. I don’t condone it. I’m trying my best to get over it. The intersex movement aims to put an end to infant genital reconfiguration surgery” (106). Here, after his transition, Cal identifies as intersex and connects his shame to his intersexuality. In the actual story, he does not tell others that he is intersex. Instead, he identifies as a man and passes as a cis man. Cal states, “I operate in society as a man…I’ve lived more than half my life as a male” (41). To the world, Cal is read as strictly male. It is true that Cal cannot necessarily show his intersexuality (how could he do that, and how would he be read as intersex?). But Cal does not tell others he is intersex (outside of the peep show). This indicates, as Sedgwick says, a “gap” between what Cal discloses to the readers and to the world. Cal(lie)’s queerness indicates a deeper, multifaceted identity than just a person matching up his genes with his gender expression, and reading Cal(lie) as normative limits their gender identity.

Another reason why we should not read Cal(lie) as normative is because this reading dismisses their intersexuality. Cal(lie)’s intersexuality, or the fact that Cal(lie) appeared to only have a vagina at birth when they also had a smaller penis and undescended testes, is not uncommon in the world. Nevertheless, intersexuality is non-normative and a “state of emergency,” as I mention earlier. But when I say that intersexuality is non-normative, I do not wish to pathologize intersexuality like the medical community within this story. Instead, I wish to read Cal’s intersexuality as simply a fact, like Cal(lie) does. Because Cal identifies as intersex, I do not wish to read Cal(lie) as being “born a girl” even though her doctors declared her as “girl.” This, I argue, erases and further pathologizes intersexuality. Rather, Cal(lie) was “raised as a girl,” as Cal(lie) states in the novel, and Cal(lie)’s body is intersex (19). But if Cal(lie) was neither born a girl nor a boy, we cannot say they are “normal.” Reading Cal(lie) as non-normative, or as not conforming to what norms (medical and social worlds) want Cal(lie) to be,
actually allows this character agency, as I will reveal. Therefore, *Middlesex* is not simply a story that promotes normativity, exploits intersexuality, or concretizes the gender binary.

However, even if we believe that Cal(lie) wants to align their genetics (the male brain) and their gender identity, shouldn’t we allow Cal(lie) and the novel to do this without simply writing it off as Cal(lie) as reifying the gender binary? Although Cal(lie) is simply a character in a book, if Cal(lie) was an actual person, we as scholars and activists should allow Cal(lie) to live the way they would like to live. Therefore, I read Cal(lie) as an intersex-born trans* character who transitions from girl to man, and chooses to pass as a cisgender man, i.e., a person who does not wish for people to know they are trans*. In Cal(lie)’s case, they do not wish for others to know they were raised a girl, labeled as intersex during puberty, and then chose to live as a man. Cal’s choice, or agency, through passing allows him to be read as a man, which is how Cal wishes to be read. Though other influences attempt to threaten Cal’s agency, especially the medical community within the novel and the nature of passing itself, Cal still manages to obtain agency.

Within this novel, the medical community wants Cal to pass as a girl; however, Cal(lie) rejects their version of passing and runs away. The novel’s medical community forces femaleness onto Callie’s body right when she is born. Her doctor does not see her “crocus,” a term for Cal(lie)’s penis. As Callie grows up, she does not sense anything “male” about her. However, Callie begins to realize something is wrong after she goes to the hospital for an injury. After Callie explains where she is having pain, the doctor finds her small penis (or enlarged clitoris). Callie and her family are sent to many other doctors, and the last doctor is Dr. Luce, who specializes in sexology, specifically hermaphroditism, at a sexual disorders and gender identity clinic in New York. Callie’s doctor is. Dr. Luce performs many bodily examinations as well as
oral questioning on Callie during her time at this clinic. The oral questioning particularly influences Dr. Luce to conclude that Callie’s gender identity is female. Dr. Luce asks Callie if she is sexually attracted to girls, and Callie hesitates, thinking about her attraction to her friend, The Obscure Object, who never actually gets a name. However, Callie ends up replying, “We’re just friends…I had sex with her brother” (417). Callie hides her attraction from girls, and states she is interested in boys. Dr. Luce uses Callie’s (false) sexual preference, in addition to other factors, to assume her female gender identity. Dr. Luce tells Callie’s parents, “[Callie’s] interests, gestures, psychosexual makeup—all these are female” (427). Therefore, Dr. Luce recommends that Callie should continue to live as a girl. But, as Dr. Luce writes in his report, Callie cannot simply continue to live the way she is currently. Dr. Luce urges Callie’s parents to consent to hormone treatments and genital surgery, even though it may result in partial or total loss of genital sensation, because intersexuality is a “medical emergency.” Dr. Luce writes: “The ability to marry and pass as a normal woman in society are also important goals, both of which will not be possible without feminizing surgery and hormone treatment” (437). In other words, Dr. Luce wants Callie to receive surgery in order for her to “pass” as a normal woman. Though Dr. Luce’s report says Callie’s gender identity is female, he does not see Callie as a normal woman, and steps must be taken in order to “fix” Callie’s femininity. Here, we can see a clear divide between normal (male or female) and monstrous (intersex). This passage suggests that Callie will never able to be a normal woman, and will forever “pass.” The important idea, however, to extract from Dr. Luce’s notes is that he wants Callie to receive surgery and continue to live as a girl, and Callie is never directly asked if she wants to continue to live as a girl. Like intersex infants, Callie cannot voice her opinion and virtually has no say about receiving surgery; the medical
community is in control. However, once Callie realizes she will be forced to have surgery, she runs away from Dr. Luce, her family, and, perhaps most importantly, Callie.

Cal(lie) actively rejects Dr. Luce’s version of passing and decides to pass as a cisgender man. When Cal(lie) runs away, two things happen: Cal(lie) dismisses the medical community’s suggestion for surgery that will allow Callie to live as a “normal” girl, and Cal(lie) rejects being a girl altogether. By running away, Cal does not have to receive surgery. Cal compares running away to his grandparents fleeing home from a war: “Now, some fifty-two years later, I was fleeing myself. I felt that I was saving myself just as definitively” (443). In other words, Cal fleeing Dr. Luce’s medical recommendations for him to live as a “normal” girl is saving himself. Since Cal(lie) cannot possibly continue to live as a girl without the surgery, Cal is, as bell hooks says, “acting in his best interest.” Cal is saving himself from surgery and perhaps others feelings of confusion, shame, and humiliation. Clearly, running away is Cal(lie)’s choice, whereas if Callie stays, she will have no agency. Additionally, after Callie runs away from Dr. Luce and from her family, Callie transitions into Cal, which is another instance of agency because it is Cal’s choice to transition into Cal. Part of Cal’s transition is dressing as a man and getting a haircut. During Cal’s haircut, the barber asks Cal, “Your father let you keep your hair like this?” Cal responds, “‘Up until now.’” (442). Underneath this disguised reasoning Cal gives the barber, Cal and readers know that it is Cal’s choice, not his father’s, to cut his hair. As Cal, Cal has power to cut his hair, travel freely, and live as a man. All of these choices are free from the medical community’s influence who want Cal to live as a girl.

Despite Cal’s anxiety about passing as a cisgender man, Cal chooses to continue to pass as cisgender. Throughout Cal’s life (not Callie’s life), he is constantly anxious about being “found out.” For instance, as Cal hitches rides to California, every time he enters the men’s
bathroom, his brain yelled, “‘You’re in the men’s!’ But the men’s was where I was supposed to be” (452). Despite Cal’s new identity, there is still something that makes him anxious about using the men’s room, and for good reason. As Nico Lang’s online article “What It's Like to Use a Public Bathroom While Trans” highlights, “A 2013 survey from UCLA’s Williams Institute found that nearly 70 percent of trans people had experienced negative interactions in public facilities — from dirty looks to snide comments to physical violence.” Though none of these complications happen to Cal in bathrooms, it’s clear from this statistic that some people believe trans* individuals are crossing a boundary when they enter a restroom that does not correlate to the sex they were declared at birth. As Cal demonstrates, “crossing the boundary” is much easier when that trans* individuals can pass as cisgender, as I will explain shortly. Part of Cal believes he is crossing a boundary, and he should not continue living his life as a man. However, when Cal enters the men’s bathroom, he is simply anxious about being outed as trans* and the violence attached to being “found out;” it is not that he doesn’t believe he is a man. Cal believes he belongs in the world as a man, like other trans* men. Even when Cal’s thoughts clash with each other and he reprimands himself, Cal remembers that he is “supposed to be” in there, and still continues to choose to live as a man.

Cal’s ability to pass as cis is a privilege, but his passing also depends upon other people. In most of Cal’s journey, he is able to pass as a cisgender man relatively well. As Cal jumps from car to car as he hitchhikes his way to California, “in every case, people took [him] for the teenage boy I was every minute more conclusively becoming” (448-449). Because Cal stylizes his body in a masculine way (wears suits, cut his hair, and speaks with a deeper voice), he is able to be read as a man. Being able to pass as a cisgender man allows Cal the power to be read as a man. Unlike some trans* individuals who may never be able to pass as cisgender, as long as Cal
suppresses any feminine traits, he is able to pass. After readers find that Callie is transitioning to Cal, the first observation of Cal is through someone else’s eyes. Ed, the barber, believes Cal is a teenage boy: “Standing inside the door but looking as though he might flee back out of it was a teenage kid, tall, stringy, and an odd mix if ever Ed saw one” (441). Ed’s certainty of Cal’s maleness allows Cal to continue passing as a cisgender male. The approval of Cal’s cisgender male-ness by other cisgender males is central to Cal’s ability to pass and to continue to pass. However, Cal’s masculinity depends upon him being read as a man by other people, which means Cal’s agency is unpredictable. That is, if someone does not read him as a man—reads him as something else—he can no longer pass as a cisgender man, and will not be read as a man.

Later in the novel, readers see how Cal’s ability to pass, and therefore his male-ness disappears. In his travels, Cal runs into a group of Grateful Dead fans and camps with them until the night he is mugged. The muggers find his school ID picture, which shows Callie, but his body appears as Cal. Naturally, this group must examine who Cal “really is” by undressing him. After they unclothe him, they beat him, and say, “Crawl back into the hole you came out of, freak” (477). Here again, we see how others find intersex and trans* individuals to be non-normative.

Although this scene suggests that Cal’s agency is fragile because he passes as a cisgender man, this scene is an exception to Cal’s life. As I discus above, Cal has been able to travel safely passing as a cis man even though he has met many people through hitchhiking. Overall, Cal is able to pass as a cisgender man. This privilege to pass offers Cal the choice to be read as a cisgender man.

Though Cal chooses to pass as a cisgender man, there is one instance—in the peep show—where Cal chooses to identify as intersex comfortably. At the peep show, Cal displays his whole body to the audience and is known as “Hermaphroditus,” or an intersexed mythical
character. As Graham argues, intersexuality is associated with both myths and freakery (15). While Graham’s argument is clear within this chapter specifically, this is the first time Cal chooses to expose his body. Every other time Cal is undressed, it is done by other people and not by himself. In this scene, for the first time, Cal opens his eyes underwater to see the crowd. Cal is unafraid. He enjoys himself—he finds the tank therapeutic, even (494). Cal’s enjoyment should not be discounted simply because he is intoxicated and far from home. Instead, we should focus on how this small part in the novel is the only part where Cal feels comfortable in and unashamed of his intersexed body. Cal is allowed a small amount of agency as an intersex person during this scene. This is the only instance where Cal proudly shows his body—a sharp contrast from Callie lying splayed, unknowing of her issues, on an examination table.

However, the peep show (and identifying as intersex) only allows Cal paradoxical agency. The peep show is, essentially, like Graham argues, a fantasy. As we can see in this scene, Cal’s intersex body at the peep show is displayed, fetishized, desired, and contained. Cal recounts how as soon as he plunges into the water, fully exposed, “no one ever [leaves] a booth at this point. Everyone extend[s] his or her membership to the Garden…and gaz[ed] with amazement, curiosity, disgust, desire” (491). Although Cal allows the audience to see his body, most of the time, Cal does not meet their gaze. The audience’s gaze controls and objectifies Cal’s body. When the audience objectifies Cal’s body, particularly his genitals, he is viewed as both desirable and disgusting. In addition, this performance at Octopussy’s Garden is only a temporary place and identity for Cal. The police eventually bust Bob Presto and his performers (496). Although this peep show scene displays Cal feeling comfortable as intersex, he does not identify or attempt to live as an intersex person after he is done performing at the Garden.
Instead, he continues to pass as a cisgender man. Overall, Cal has more agency living as a man because, as Graham maintains, intersexuality is considered mythic and freakish.

Although Cal has some agency as a person who identifies as intersex at the peep show, he overall does not wish to be an unintelligible identity. In order to understand how Cal’s agency and identity may work inside our world and not just the pages of Middlesex, it is useful to compare him to a person who faced a similar situation, such as David Reimer. Judith Butler delves into real-life examples of unintelligible gendered individuals in “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignments and Allegories of Transsexuality.” Butler examines what unintelligible gender means to personhood, according to society. David Reimer is the main example of Butler’s piece. When Reimer was eight months old, as doctors tried to cure his phimosis, doctors accidentally burned off a major portion of his penis. His parents, unsure of what to do about David’s gender, wrote to Dr. John Money about David. After Money examined David, he recommended David’s parents to raise him as a girl. David’s testicles were removed, and doctors prepped him for a future vaginoplasty. David then grew up as Brenda. However, shortly after the surgery, Money realized that Brenda’s mannerisms were masculine, and she preferred masculine activities. She urinated while standing and enjoyed playing with guns. Milton Diamond, who believes in a hormonal gender identity foundation, eventually reviewed Brenda’s case, and offered David/Brenda to change into a boy. David, at age 14, chose himself to start living as a boy, and received a double mastectomy as well as two phalloplasty operations. However, though Reimer received these surgeries to reflect his masculinity, he stated that he wishes for his worth to be more than “what he has between his legs” (72). Reimer wanted to push beyond these gender norms, into inconceivability.
Reimer’s life connects to Cal in a few different ways; however, I will specifically focus on how Reimer and Cal find agency within a culturally determined gender binary. Although both feel failure of the sex they have been assigned, Cal and Reimer obtain some sort of agency. Like Cal, Reimer chooses to live as a boy because he wants to. Although a portion of the medical community (John Money) believes that Reimer should live as a girl, David rejects the doctor’s recommendations. Also, both Reimer and Cal do not want to be classified strictly by their genitals. Reimer particularly wants to be “something more.” Reimer says he wishes to be more than his genitals, but he does not say whether he wishes to be more than gender itself. In fact, if we interpret Reimer’s quote as him believing his genitals do not define him, we can easily connect this to Cal’s situation. Cal never explicitly says he wishes to be something more than his genitals, but his actions (passing as a cisgender man) prove that he does. Although Cal may be intersex and may have grown up as a girl, he sees himself and performs as something other than what the medical community wants. For example, if Cal went to the doctor, he probably would not be labeled as a man because of his genitals. Passing as a cisgender man arguably pushes against the medical community’s definitions of “normal” gender. However, socially, Cal is still read as a man. Cal and Reimer must be somewhat intelligible, as Butler argues, to have subjectivity. As Butler asserts, “The double aspect of subjection appears to lead to a vicious circle: the agency of the subject appears to be an effect of its subordination. Any effort to oppose that subordination will necessarily presuppose and reinvoke [subordination]” (The Psychic Life of Power 12). In other words, the subject’s agency depends upon its acceptance of subjugation. If the subject tries to resist subordination, the subject will simply evoke subordination once again. To Butler, it seems as though there is a never-ending cycle of subordination (which seems bleak), but within this subordination, a person can find agency. For Reimer and Cal to have any
agency, they must be a legible gender to society: they must accept some sort of gender label and perform gendered acts. This legible gender allows them to be subjects. Since Cal and Reimer choose to pass as cisgender men, they are read as men, and obtain subjectivity and agency through passing.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, Cal in *Middlesex* can be read as trans* individual instead of a character that reinforces the medical definition of sex or as a normative identity. Reading Cal as a trans* character who chooses to pass as cisgender gives us a way to understand passing in a neutral or even advantageous way in relation to Cal as a trans* person. Passing for intersex individuals is normally forced at birth, as Martin Behrensen notes: “Now we may suggest that in the case of intersexuels, passing is not a social choice, but a social reality that is reinforced by surgical and pharmaceutical means” (182). Cal’s “passing” is not only a choice itself because of the circumstances, but “passing” also allows Cal to be read as a man, how he wishes to be read. Cal’s case, of course, is not a typical intersex person’s story. Instead, this further encourages us to read Cal as a trans* person who transitioned, and to understand that passing is a way for trans* individuals to be read as they wish to be identified.
Throughout this chapter, I will be using “Cal(lie)” and the singular version of “they” when I discuss Cal(lie)’s transition and when it is unclear who Cal(lie) is at that point in the novel.

While Lee’s reading of the end of Middlesex is compelling, I believe that events that occur right before the end have more weight overall on the affirmation of Cal’s manhood. Before Milton’s funeral (which is right at the end), Cal comes back home to his family after living in San Francisco for years. Though his mother does not know how to act, Chapter Eleven, Cal’s brother, accepts Cal’s masculine identity right away. Cal and Chapter Eleven tease each other like old days (521). Here, we see Cal being accepted back into the family as Cal instead of Callie. Moreover, right before Milton’s funeral, Desdemona, whose “mind is going,” realizes that Callie transitioned to Cal (522). Desdemona stares straight at Cal, and exclaims, “Calliope!...What happened to you?” Cal calmly explains, “I grew up” (526). After a short conversation with Cal about how Desdemona blames her marriage to Lefty, her brother, for Cal’s identity, Desdemona smiles and says, “I guess my spoon was right” (527). Desdemona’s spoon, which predicted Cal would be born a boy, was “wrong” at the time of Callie’s birth. However, Callie’s transition to Cal affirms her prediction. Desdemona’s joke and apparent easy acceptance of Cal’s “new” masculine identity helps Cal accept his masculine identity among his family. Family is a large part of this novel and Cal’s identity as a whole. Therefore, it is important to note how Cal’s family accepts him back as Cal. Ultimately, this affects how Cal sees himself at the end of the novel: since Cal was accepted back into his family as a man, he now feels qualified to participate in the Greek tradition.

If we take Cal(lie)’s intersexuality into account as her biological sex and try to read her as a trans* character who transitions, this complicates the notions of “cisgender” and “trans*” because there is no such thing as the opposite of intersex. Recently, the term “dyadic” has been used as describing the opposite of intersex. This term, however, is under scrutiny in intersex blogs. “Dyadic” promotes the notion that everyone fits cleanly into the roles of either “man” or “woman.” In other words, the word dyadic solidifies the gender binary (Actually Intersex). As Tiffany Jones points out, it’s “illogical to call any sex ‘opposite’ to intersex” (9). If one defines intersex as a person who cannot be clearly defined as female or male, but rather as a combination or in between, then the opposite would not be fully female or fully male. The opposite of intersex would contain no characteristics of either sex. Therefore, when I read Cal(lie), I do not consider their intersexuality; I only consider how Callie was declared a girl at birth and raised a girl, and then decides to transition to a man.

Here, though, we cannot read Callie as passing as a girl. Callie was declared a girl at birth and raised as a girl and, since I am reading her as trans*, I consider female to be her declared sex at birth.

Callie’s lack of agency may also be because, traditionally, agency is thought of as strictly a male. As Judith Kegan Gardiner states, “agency was assumed to be a unified attribute to maleness, combining sexual potency, self-confidence, labor power, personal capabilities, and political and psychological autonomy” (2-3). On the other hand, women did not have access to
agency, and society tends to idealize lack of agency in women (3). Since Dr. Luce uses many other stereotypes to determine Callie’s gender identity, he may not feel the need to discuss with Callie what gender identity she wants to be because, to Dr. Luce, Callie has a female gender identity, and women do not have access to agency. Also, Callie is a young, intersex teen, so she might not know what she wants. Therefore, Callie is not granted any agency from the medical community because of her female-ness, intersexuality, and her age.

6 As Laura Mulvey argues, theatres (and therefore peep shows) provide a voyeuristic separation that makes the subject scopophilic, or something pleasurable to look at. Though Mulvey only discusses how women can be scopophilic subjects and therefore are viewed with the male gaze, I suggest that intersex and other non-normative bodies also are subject to the male gaze. Mulvey’s three points that make up the male gaze—scopophilia (the pleasure in looking), ego and narcissism of the audience member (identification with the image seen), and Freud’s castration complex (how a woman lacks the phallus and therefore symbolizes the castration threat)—all apply to this scene in Middlesex.

7 Phimosis is the inability to retract the foreskin behind the penis’ head. It can result in pain in urination, painful erections, and paraphimosis (where the foreskin becomes trapped).
CHAPTER TWO. “HE HAS MADE US ALL UNREAL”: THE “DOUBLE NARRATIVE” AND PASSING AS CIS IN JACKIE KAY’S TRUMPET

In *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, Maria Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg suggest that passing “is not about erasure or denial, as it is often castigated but, rather, about the creation and establishment of an alternative set of narratives” (4). In other words, Sanchez and Schlossberg do not believe passing should be seen as a disavowal of that person’s past. Instead, passing should be considered as a way someone lives their life. However, unlike what Sanchez and Schlossberg claim, I maintain that passing can be about erasure or denial of another experience, life, or person. But like Sanchez and Schlossberg, I also insist passing *is* about creating an alternative set of narratives. In order to create an alternative set of narratives, a person who passes must deny the person or identity they were given or stuck with before. Along with the identity they were before, a trans* person who passes as cisgender often must reject their childhood and family in order to successfully pass as cis. This trans* person, if they wish to be read as cisgender, must also hide their trans* identity from others, including from the medical and legal systems. In this way, passing can be about erasure, but in this instance, the erasure is the trans* person’s choice. However, medical and legal systems can also participate in erasure of a trans individual. These systems can undermine a trans person’s agency over their own identity, and can tell a different narrative than the “passing” trans* person’s life (the “alternative” narrative). In other words, these systems may say a trans* man is a woman even though the trans* person’s life negates the systems’ narrative. This narrative often clashes with the alternative narrative that passing provides, and can erase the alternative narrative that passing allows. Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* exposes this conflicting “double narrative” (or, one narrative told by the medical and legal systems, and another alternative narrative told by the trans* person) of Joss Moody.
Jackie Kay’s novel *Trumpet* narrates the life and death of Joss Moody, a trans* man loosely based on the jazz musician Billy Tipton, who passes as a cisgender man until his death. This novel pieces together Joss’ life and death through memories from his wife Millie and son Colman. Therefore, it is just as important to explore how Joss affected these characters as it is to explore Joss’ life. In this chapter, I will explore how Joss passes as a cisgender man in *Trumpet*, but also how Joss is punished for passing. I will use Foucault’s “Right of Death and Power Over Life” to highlight the erasure, or metaphorical killing, of Joss by certain people in this story. In addition, because of their association with Joss, I will analyze how Joss’ family is affected by his stigmatized identity when it is exposed to the public. Like Sanchez and Schlossberg, I will argue passing creates another narrative—specifically, a “double” narrative in *Trumpet*. This double narrative includes how Joss lives his life (as a man…the “Joss” narrative), and how Joss is read after his death (as the sex he was declared at birth: female…the “Josephine” narrative). But Joss’ passing narrative is often lost and re-written by the other narrative that his biographer and other various people depict after Joss’ death.

Most writers who have written about *Trumpet* have read Joss as a trans* man, but there are a few who insist upon reading him differently. In “As You Wear: Cross-dressing and Identity Politics in Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet*,” Alice Walker (not to be confused with the famous author) specifically analyzes Joss as a cross-dresser. One of Walker’s footnotes states, “I believe that much of the existing scholarship on transgender is pertinent to analyses of cross-dressing, but while I do make reference to this scholarship, it is not my intention to equate ‘crossing’ identities to trans gender identities” (35). Though Walker does not give readers definitive definitions of cross-dressing and transgender, she separates these two identities. According to GLAAD.org, a cross-dresser is typically a “heterosexual man who occasionally wears clothes, makeup, and
accessories culturally associated with women. [Cross-dressing] is a form of gender expression, and is not done for entertainment purposes. Cross-dressers do not wish to permanently change their sex or live full-time as women.”¹ In other words, cross-dressers do not identify as women when they present themselves as women.² They can be read as more gender fluid compared to trans* individuals.³ In this chapter, I define the term “transgender” or “trans*” as a person who does not feel a correspondence with the sex they are declared at birth and their gender identity, or the gender category they feel they belong to (Stryker 13). Therefore, I assert there is a clear separation of cross-dressing and trans* identity. The separation of cross-dressing and transgender is important in both Walker’s analysis and mine. However, in order to understand the difference between these terms, we also must look how one can be both a cross-dresser and a trans* individual.

Relying on Leslie Feinberg’s explanation of cross-dressing, I maintain that the term “cross-dresser” is an inaccurate classification of Joss Moody. In the introduction of her book, Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue, Feinberg describes hirself as a “masculine, lesbian, female-to-male cross-dresser and transgenderist” (22). Again, the terms “cross-dressing” and “transgender” are separated. But Feinberg identifies as both simultaneously. The definitions above both contradict each other but also can live harmoniously. For instance, when Feinberg identifies as both cross-dresser and transgender, zie acknowledges that zie is “breaking the rules” by not fitting into the “prevalent Western concepts of what a woman or a man ‘should’ look like,” but zie was declared female at birth, and hir current “gender expression” is male (1). This intricacy shows the “gender poetry” of complex identities: gender is many things.⁴ Though I cannot speak for Feinberg, these passages suggest that cross-dressing is something one does to express one’s gender, but this does not mean this person identifies as another gender (at least not
Weiss 36

full-time); gender identification and gender expression are different. Feinberg’s transgenderism accounts for and bridges hir being born female and hir male gender expression currently. Similarly, Joss was declared female at birth, Josephine, but lives as a man. Since Joss identifies and dresses as a man, he cannot be read as a cross-dresser; he must be read as a man.

To label Joss as a cross-dresser is to overlook and even erase how he wished to be read and was read by most people in his life. Joss is not gender fluid in the slightest; he always is portrayed as either Joss or Josephine. In other words, Joss does not wear feminine clothing and still identify as Joss. Joss intends to pass as a cis man and identifies as a man continuously, even with his wife, Millie. Millie, who cannot substitute Joss’ voice, but can give readers another perspective, cannot see this “woman” that Joss was before. Millie confesses, “I can’t stare at these pictures and force myself to see ‘this person who is obviously a woman, once you know’—according to some reports. I can’t see her. I don’t know if I’ll ever see her. The photographs of Joss on his album covers are still the same to me. I can’t change him” (100). One may read this as a denial of her lesbian desire (which I will delve into shortly), but regarding Joss’ gender, this passage alludes to Joss’ masculine gender expression that allows him to pass as a cisgender man. To Millie, he will always be remembered as a man because that is how he lived most of his life.

Unlike Walker, I will not read Joss as a cross-dressing character, but as a trans* man.

Since there is a clear division between Joss and Josephine, we must dismiss the idea that Joss is a cross-dresser, but also that Joss and Millie were lesbians. Ceri Davies’ “‘The Truth is a Thorny Issue’: Lesbian Denial in Jackie Kay’s Trumpet” discusses how Millie manipulates “the truth” to deny her own lesbian desire and to confirm Joss’ masculinity. To Davies, this “truth” is that Joss was actually a woman: that “his masculinity was no more than a costume” (6). Davies disregards the fact that Joss identified as a male and instead, like Joss’ biographer Sophie Stones
and many others in *Trumpet*, rewrites Joss’ story in a way that does not align with how he lived his life. By reading Millie as a lesbian and Joss’ identity as an impersonation of a man, Davies completely strips Joss of his agency and his identity. Unlike Walker, Davies, and fictional character Sophie Stones, I wish to look at the ways Joss did live his life, specifically how Joss passes as a cisgender man. Looking at the activities Joss does or must do in order to pass as a cisgender man may not give us straightforward answers as to “why he is the way he is,” but we come to understand what is important to Joss and what Joss must do to pass as cisgender successfully.

In *Trumpet*, Joss is able to pass as a cis man until his death, which is an “alternative” narrative to the sex he was declared at birth and after death. One way Joss is able to pass is by avoiding medical treatment altogether. Throughout the novel, Millie and Colman recall how Joss avoided doctors, but do not explicitly say why. Colman recounts, “My father had a lifelong terror, phobia whatever, about hospitals. Makes a lot of sense in hindsight. He was so scared of doctors, he passed that on to me” (68). Colman goes on to say that when Joss got sick, he refused to get treatment. *Trumpet* does not delve into any of Joss’ possible bad medical experiences, but it is important to note that Joss would not see a doctor, even when his life depended on it. While it is possible that Joss could have sought medical care and continued to live as a trans* man, it is unlikely, especially since much of Joss’ life took place around the 1960s, before trans* activism began. Since the medical community, both then and today, often pathologizes trans* individuals, Joss may not have been able to continue to live as a man. In addition, if the doctors had access to Joss’ body, someone could have leaked Joss’ secret. Since Joss was a public figure, this revelation could have affected his career, his family, and his whole identity. Because Joss avoided the medical community, he was able to live as a man (his “alternative Joss” narrative)
although he was declared female at birth. However, without the medical treatment, Joss could not live; but with medical treatment, Joss’ masculinity could not exist, either. Joss’ only option was to continue to pass as cisgender so he could die as a man.

Joss’ clothing and binding bandages are also a large part of his passing because they hide his femininity and emphasize his masculine features. Walker makes a compelling point when she states, “Without the individual, there is only a pile of clothes; the accessories that facilitate, but which do not constitute, the act of crossdressing: clothes may make the man, but only when they are worn” (36). The individual must wear the clothes in order for them to mean something. In order for Joss to pass as a cisgender man, he needs masculine clothing and to bandage his breasts. Millie notes how “the bandages…were part of our life together” (203). The bandages not only hide his breasts from the rest of the world, but they also hide his breasts from Millie and from himself. If Joss did not bind his breasts, it is more likely that he would have been read as a woman. Concealing and ignoring his “female” body help Joss form his identity as a man. No one has access to his unclothed body except Millie when he is living. After his death, many people have access to his body—doctors, the funeral director, Colman—without Joss’ permission. Colman’s account of seeing his father wearing masculine attire but seeing a female body is depicted during the funeral. Colman thinks, “It was the weirdest thing, but the man in the coffin and the woman that I saw in that funeral parlour really did seem to me to be two different people” (72). Even Colman (whether it is because he wants to see his father as a man or other reasons) recognizes that the clothing changes the person and allows them to pass as cisgender. Clothing is much more than a performance for Joss. Clothing helps Joss establish his identity to himself and to the world. Clothing also separates Joss from Josephine, and helps us understand the difference between the “Joss” narrative and the “Josephine” narrative.
Though it may seem Joss erases his past, he actually separates his past from his present. In order for Joss to live as Joss, he must erase, or at least distance himself from, Josephine. But one cannot simply read the erasure of Josephine as Joss hating his past. Instead, one may read this erasure as choosing to live as either Joss or Josephine—he cannot live as both and cannot bear to tell other family besides Millie. Millie makes a point to mention guests at their wedding, realizing none of them were from Joss’ childhood (29). This memory struck Millie for a moment: she understood what Joss must do to live as a man. He must sever ties from friends and family. However, we may not even read this memory as erasure at all. There is evidence that Joss does not want to give up his past. Joss still keeps in contact with his mother while he was living. After Joss’ death, Maggie the maid tells Colman that she saw a letter in Joss’ desk. Maggie says, “My eye caught a letter…It began, ‘Dear Mum,’ which was odd since Mr. Moody told me his mother had died a long time ago…But the strangest thing was how the letter was signed. It was signed Josephine” (178). What is interesting here is that in this letter, Josephine, however briefly, still exists. This letter suggests that Joss wants to keep in contact with his mother, but he is not comfortable doing this as Joss. No one except Joss—not even Millie—was supposed to know about this letter. Maggie, coming upon the letter by accident, saw the different name, thinking Joss wrote the letter for someone else. Though Maggie saw the letter, Joss still successfully passed as a cisgender man because she ignored it. However, just because Joss writes as Josephine, this does not necessarily mean he wants to live as Josephine. Rather, Joss wants to maintain a relationship with his mother that may be impossible as Joss, and he is not willing to risk this relationship. For this reason, Joss must separate people from his past (Josephine) and present (Joss) identity. People from his past can only know of Josephine and can never discover the connection between Josephine and Joss. “Present” people, or people who only know of Joss,
can never know of Josephine. Trumpet demonstrates why people cannot know about both Joss and Josephine: they cannot exist at the same time. Once people know Joss was Josephine at one time, people force labels onto him or completely rewrite him as Josephine. When Joss lives, he can defend his “alternative Joss narrative,” or his identity as Joss. It is only when Joss dies that the two narratives compete with each other.

Though Joss’ passing as a cisgender man is complex and could be challenged by anyone at any time, he is able to pass as cisgender during his life without stigma. Because of the actions that Joss takes to pass as cis (binding his breasts and presenting himself as a man), he has the privilege to pass. Joss is able to actively defend and perform his masculinity every day. Therefore, since Joss passes as a cis man (as opposed to being known as a trans* man), he does not face the stigma attached to having an “abnormal” identity. As Erving Goffman states, “Where the stigma is nicely invisible and known only to the person who possesses it, who tells no one, then here again is a matter of concern in the study of passing” (73). A person may be stigmatized because of their character traits, including mental disorder, physical stigma, and stigma of group identity. Although Goffman never wrote about trans* individuals particularly, we can extend the definition of the first stigma, mental disorder, to trans* identity because trans* people were (and sometimes still are) thought of as having a mental disorder by medical communities in particular. A person with an invisible stigma, as Goffman emphasizes in the quote above, can pass as “normal” (cisgender, in Joss’ case) and can live without the labels of “bad” or “abnormal.” In life, Joss has control over his own masculinity, and therefore has some sort of agency. On the other hand, Joss is not able to pass as cisgender after his death. Joss then loses his agency, and is stigmatized by others within the novel.
After Joss dies, he is no longer able to pass as a cisgender man, and certain groups have access to his body and power over his body that resembles Michel Foucault’s “Right of Death and Power over Life.” In the first few pages, Foucault describes how the sovereign had the right to “take life or let live” instead of having power over life and death, as people normally believe (136). Today, Foucault says, our focus is on life: to extend and improve life, which he calls “bio-power.” If, as Foucault argues, our main focus today is to extend and improve life rather than taking one’s life away, then why are people in *Trumpet* intent on exposing Joss’ “true gender” after his death?

Before we attempt to answer the question above, it may be helpful to look at how living bodies function in this bio-power world. Foucault recounts how many institutions arose during the classical period:

universities, secondary schools, barracks, workshops; there was also the emergence, in the field of political practices and economic observation, of the problems of birthrate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration. Hence there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations. (140)

In other words, many different institutions (below, I will specifically apply medical institutions to explain regulation of bodies) around this time developed to discipline these living bodies—to regulate bodies, and punish the bodies that did not obey. The people enforce the laws of these institutions, and therefore the people also maintain bio-power itself. Those who do not follow these rules can face death. Foucault states that the law and people who enforce the law impose certain norms: “Another consequence of this development of bio-power was the growing importance assumed by the action of the norm, at the expense of the juridical system of the law.
Law cannot help but be armed, and its arm, *par excellence*, is death” (144). “The action of the norm,” or those who instill normalcy, believed the law needed to be combined with instilling normalcy to make the law even more powerful. Fundamentally, one must conform to normalcy or be punished. In order to enforce these norms, the punishment must be the most terrifying thing of all in a bio-power world: death.

Joss’ body did not follow “the rules,” according to medical and legal systems. However, because Joss strayed away from doctors and passed as a cisgender man so well, he was never outed as a trans* man during his life. Therefore, during his life, his body was never actually punished. How do people react when a seemingly obedient (gender normative) body is discovered as “rebellious” after the person dies? In *Trumpet*, the deceived people, like Colman and Sophie Stones, feel it is their job to out the person who has deceived them. This brings us back to the question—if the focus of our world today is bio-power (extending those lives that obey the rules), then why are characters within this novel determined to expose Joss’ “alternative narrative?”

If, as Foucault insists, our current focus is extending and improving life (not necessarily individual lives), this means that undisciplined bodies like Joss’s body must be punished during their lives. However, I maintain that if an undisciplined body like Joss’ is not punished during life, then Joss’ identity is punished after death. If we look at the current system of bio-power in terms of Joss’ story, we actually see a combination of the “ancient system” and the bio-power system that Foucault identifies. The institutions mentioned earlier (schools, hospitals, and other places discipline bodies meant for bio-power purposes) have the power to punish and even to kill, literally and figuratively (and these institutions replace the sovereign and their power). For example, after the doctor examined Joss’ body, she “got her red pen out from her doctor’s bag.
What she thought of as her emergency red pen. She crossed out ‘male’ and wrote ‘female’ in her rather bad doctor’s handwriting” (44). This doctor must reflect “the law” of the medical institution. This law is shown here: Joss, a person with breasts and a vagina, must be declared “woman” because this is what the medical community considers as normal: a person with a vagina must be labeled as a woman. As Foucault says, the law “has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor” (144). In this example, the doctor measures and appraises Joss, and determines that he is “breaking the law” because Joss lived as a man but has culturally defined female genitalia. Measurements and “facts” (which contribute to the “Josephine” narrative) disguise the actual violence that this doctor is doing to Joss’ identity (the “Joss” narrative”). With her vivid, permanent red pen, she crosses out how Joss lived—metaphorically killing the “Joss” narrative—and rewrites his whole life as if he lived as a woman. It appears that even after Joss’ death, the law must be upheld.

The medical community in this novel has tremendous power to extend or extinguish life and certain ways of living. Since Joss passes as a cisgender man, he cannot go to a doctor’s office or hospital without them discriminating or pathologizing him. Joss had to avoid the medical community—one of the institutions that has the power to extend life—because he passed as a cis man. If we recall Feinberg’s example in my endnote about how certain doctors will not treat trans* individuals, we understand that the medical community has the power to refuse extending one’s life, or lives that matter. Moreover, the medical community also has the power to erase the identity of someone who passes as cisgender. In other words, the person named “Joss” is killed as soon as the medical community inspects his body—Joss is no longer himself after he dies. The people who obey the law are the ones whose lives and identities are extended in life and in death.
However, in *Trumpet*, there are narratives from other people that contribute to the “Joss” narrative that clash with the medical community’s “Josephine” narrative. These narratives, or memories, mainly by Joss’ wife Millie and son Colman, make up Joss’ identity after his death. Clearly, at least two narratives about Joss exist in *Trumpet*: one narrative is from Joss as a living being, and the other narrative begins after Joss’ death (but is also combined with Josephine’s birth). Since Joss passed as cisgender until his death, he cannot defend his own narrative and is punished in his death. Consequently, Millie defends Joss’ narrative, but because she knew about Joss’ “female-ness,” she is also punished. Colman, on the other hand, does not know about Joss’ “female-ness” and does not defend Joss’ life initially. Because of this, Colman is not punished by his relationship with Joss. Many scholars who write about *Trumpet* neglect analyzing how Joss’ family is affected by Joss being outed as a trans* man. Because Millie and Joss are a large part of Joss’ “double narrative,” it is important to analyze how they are (or are not) punished by having relations with him.

One of the connections between Joss’ family and Joss is the stigma of trans* identity. As I discussed above, Joss avoided stigma during his life because he passed until his death. Since he passed until his death, the stigma cannot be projected onto his dead body. Instead, this stigma attaches itself to the living memory of Joss and to the living people associated with Joss. Because Millie and Colman are related to Joss, they are stigmatized as well. In addition to Joss’ identity being “punished” after his death, Millie and Colman are punished during their lives. Goffman writes, “The tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections provides a reason why such relations tend to either be avoided or to be terminated, where existing” (30). However, Millie and Colman, who could terminate or disavow their
relationship with Joss now that he is dead, find themselves holding on to him in the end, which results in their own stigma.

Since Millie is connected to Joss’ identity, she also has a “double narrative” identity. As I discussed earlier, because Millie was the only person who knew about Joss’ “female” body, Millie is punished. The media pushes labels like “lesbian” onto Millie and attempts to re-write her identity. Because Millie does not speak to the press, there are no views to disrupt these rumors. The only negation of these labels are from Millie’s thoughts in the novel. Though Millie does not challenge the lesbian label to the press, Trumpet makes it clear that she is embarrassed by this label, as Ceri Davies points out. “Lesbian” is a term that could hurt Millie because of the stigma attached to it. The stigma, though, may have to do more with Joss’ identity. If Joss was not a man, then it seems their whole relationship—as husband and wife—was a lie. Therefore, when Joss’ gender identity is challenged, Millie’s sexual identity is also challenged. Millie says, “…what hurts me the most is the fact that I am still alive. If it were not for Colman, I would not be sitting here feeling this strange sharp pain of the living” (36). In addition to the pain of losing her husband, her whole life with Joss is being questioned. This punishment—her identity being challenged—is almost affecting her the way it would affect Joss if he were alive. From Millie’s explanation, it appears that her agency is taken away, like Joss’ agency after his death. Now, Millie’s life is broken into two competing narratives: the one where she is read as a heterosexual woman married to Joss Moody, a man, and the one where she is read as a lesbian who was hiding her “real” identity and Joss’ “real” identity.

Joss’ stigma affects Colman in different ways than it affects Millie. The novel implies that Colman’s masculinity is damaged after Joss’ death. Throughout the novel, Colman processes his feelings on how his father was “actually female.” Like Millie (and perhaps even more so),
Colman’s identity depends on his relationship to Joss. Indeed, Mandy Koolen argues that Colman has “(sub)consciously modelled his masculinity on his memory of this father” (77). Colman makes that clear when he is first introduced to readers. Colman says: “When I was little, I could coast, bask in his glory. ‘Joss Moody’s son’ It was all right, it was, being Joss Moody’s son” (45). Colman was known not as “Colman,” but as “Joss Moody’s son,” like he was a replica, a small duplicate of Joss. But now, Colman knows himself differently: “Colman Moody, son of Joss Moody, the famous trumpet player. You know the one. The one who pretended to be a man and fetched up a woman at his death. Conned his own son. That boy must have been thick” (46). Colman is now the son of Joss Moody, the trumpet player who was actually a woman and tricked his own son. The fact that Joss appeared to have “tricked” Colman into believing he was a man affects Colman deeply. Since Colman was seen as the replica of Joss, Colman questions Joss’ and his own masculinity. Joss taught Colman how to “be a man,” even though Joss is not considered male in medical terms. Part of Colman’s processing is how his own masculinity is in question because of his father’s “female” masculinity. Colman is devastated when he finds out with the rest of the world that Joss had a “female” body. What he thought he knew about his father and himself is destroyed. Unlike Millie, Colman does not necessarily have a “double narrative” identity; instead, Colman has one narrative that is damaged in his eyes.

Colman’s interior struggle about his father’s and his own masculinity leads him to tell “the truth” about his father, and this hurts both him and his father. When Colman meets Sophie, she sympathizes with Colman when he finds out about Joss. In reality, Sophie’s sympathy is a form of manipulation. Sophie manipulates Colman into helping her write a false biography. Sophie, unlike Colman’s mother, is there for him to confide in. However, Sophie is clearly manipulating him. She says, “Colman is coming along nicely now. Each time he divulges a little
more. Soon I will crack him” (126). Because her first book didn’t have the success she was looking for, she needs to deliver on this biography of Joss Moody, and uses any tools she can. Even though Colman is separating himself from his friends, he does not stop seeing Sophie (137). Sophie uses Colman’s anger and confusion about his own masculinity to sell this story. Shrewdly, Sophie claims her and Colman are doing Joss a favor. They are “making her [Joss] immortal” (126). However, this biography will not make Joss Moody immortal. This will make Josephine immortal. This biography (and immortality) of Josephine challenges Joss’ life narrative. In people’s mind now, when they hear “Joss Moody,” they will immediately think of Josephine. However, instead of thinking of Joss as a man, people will associate Joss with a woman. Readers of the biography may not call Joss “Josephine,” but they will still be erasing Joss’ gender identity. This biography will also punish Colman. Selling his father out will create distance between him and his mother. Selling out his father is selling out Colman himself—undermining and challenging his own masculinity.

Colman’s damaged masculinity, though, somehow creates a space where he accepts his father’s “alternative narrative.” Nearly at the end of the novel, Colman dreams how he must save his father, a small girl (260). Both Koolen and I interpret this as Colman believing “he has to protect his father from being misread by having the complexities of his gender erased” (77). In other words, Colman’s subconscious makes him question selling his father’s story to Sophie Stones, the biographer. He has to protect his father from being rewritten as only a woman. This incident is a large change from Colman attempting to, as Koolen says, “assert the ‘realness’” of his own masculinity by describing how his penis seemed bigger and harder since Joss died (74). These changes in Colman’s attitude from the beginning suggest that Colman’s shattered masculinity has made him rethink masculinity and his identity as a whole. Colman recognizes
the fragility of his own masculinity and perhaps even that masculinity is a social construct. Or, perhaps in this moment, Colman does not believe that his masculinity (or the way he learned his masculinity) matters anymore. In addition, this passage suggests that Colman realizes his father wanted to live this way, and is coming to terms with Joss’ “alternative narrative.” Although Trumpet ends ambiguously and does not tell us if Colman actually saves Joss from Sophie’s biography, Colman, it seems, is not willing to “sell out” his father to Sophie Stones. As a result, Joss is not completely rewritten as a woman at the end.

What do we learn from analyzing Millie and Colman’s relationship to Joss? First, we learn that Millie and Joss faced similar (but not identical) stigma. Joss is labeled as both a woman (who lived as a man) and a lesbian after he dies—both stigmatized identities—and Joss’ stigma is transferred to Millie. Millie is labeled as the lesbian wife who knew that Joss was actually a woman. However, Millie understands herself as the heterosexual wife of Joss Moody, a man. Millie also has a double narrative life—one identity she performs, and another identity others push on her. On the other hand, Colman’s sense of identity is lost when doctors reveal Joss’ “female” body to him. But Colman’s loss of identity also makes him understand Joss’ loss of identity. Both Millie and Colman end up supporting Joss’ “alternative narrative” of passing by telling their own stories and memories.

This novel demonstrates how Joss has a “double narrative” life: one narrative is the life he lived, and the other is the combined narrative of what sex he was declared as at birth and after he dies. Although Trumpet ends unclearly, readers may assume that the public will get both narratives, just in a biased, pathologizing way. The public will know Joss Moody lived his life as a man, but Stones’ biography will sensationalize and pathologize Joss by calling him a “woman who pretended to be a man.” I believe that Joss’ narrative that is prone to erasure and rewriting
by the “Josephine” narrative calls for a protection or recollection of these stories and of the people who have been punished for living their own truth. As J. Jack Halberstam affirms, “…we need a transgender history, a method for recording the presence of gender-ambiguous subjects sensitive enough not to reduce them to either “women all along’ or ‘failed men’” (“Unlosing Brandon” 54). If people like Joss are reduced down to “women all along,” like Sophie Stones does (and like Diane Middlebrook does with Billy Tipton’s biography), we lose a history of these more complex identities who make may it easier for those future people who have complex gender identities, but more importantly, we erase who these people lived their lives as. To rewrite a person’s history without their permission (which is much easier to do when they are dead) dishonors them and stigmatizes their family as well. Perhaps we need to display both narratives of the “double narrative” side-by-side. Instead of trying to pathologize and find reasons why trans* people lived their lives the way they do, we can, as Feinberg and Halberstam do, find ways to bridge these two separate identities without reducing their complexities, and this would honor trans* lives and stories. Autobiographies and memoirs sometimes do this work, as we see in the next chapter. Though the trans* person’s body may only show one gender expression, the trans* person should not have to hide their past for safety or for in fear of being punished or rewritten as the sex they were declared at birth.
NOTES

1 GLAAD is an organization dedicated to bring LGBTQ+ news sources in order to build support for equality for these communities.

2 Cross-dressers are not limited to heterosexual men.

3 For a fuller definition of trans*, see the introduction of this piece.

4 Feinberg describes gender as “the poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught” (10).

5 Today, many trans* individuals still find it difficult to find doctors who sympathize or even treat them. Leslie Feinberg describes a time when they had a deadly fever, and when the doctor examined their body and realized s/he was biologically female, he “told [them] to get dressed and then he stormed out of the room” (2). If this was happening in the late 20th century, this very well could have happened to Joss.

6 Millie is the exception.

7 The two “buts” in the sentence is Foucault’s exact wording.

8 In addition to Female Masculinity, Judith Halberstam’s In a Queer Time and Place discusses female masculinity. Halberstam argues that the term “transgender” can be applied to certain bodies not to remove them from a category such as male, but to prevent him from being heard as female (55).
CHAPTER THREE. REDEFINING ‘REALNESS’: AN ALTERNATIVE TO PASSING AS CISGENDER

Janet Mock’s memoir *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* discusses many trans* issues, including the notion of “passing.” Mock explains:

Examples of people ‘passing’ in the media…are often portrayed as leading a life of tragic duplicity and as deceivers who will be punished harshly by society when their true identity is uncovered. This is no different for trans people who ‘pass’ as their gender or, more accurately, are assumed to be cis or blend in as cis, as if that is the standard or norm. This pervasive thinking frames trans people as illegitimate and unnatural. If a trans woman who knows herself and operates in the world as a woman is seen, perceived, treated, and viewed as a woman, isn’t she just being herself? She isn’t passing; she is merely being. (155)

In other words, “passing” individuals, or trans* people who are seen as cis and do not disclose they are trans*, are seen by many people as dishonest and living two different lives. Mock believes that if “passing” is the ultimate goal of trans* individuals, this encourages them to hide their trans* identities, and this actually furthers discrimination against trans* individuals. If a trans* woman is able to be read as a woman, she is not “passing” as anything; she is being herself, or being “real.” This passage suggests that Mock wishes to eliminate the idea that trans* people “pass.” Instead, Mock believes trans* people are full, complex beings and should be seen as having an inherent right to self-definition. In this chapter, I argue that Mock’s redefinition of “realness” challenges the typical notions of “passing.” The term “realness” (as opposed to “passing”) provides a space for trans* individuals to be themselves without being seen as duplicitous. However, “realness” falls into the trap that typical definitions of “passing” do: for
those who may not embody “realness” to others, they are seen as “unreal.” Despite this downfall, “realness” is an alternative to “passing” for trans* individuals who may be read as cisgender.

Many reviews of Janet Mock’s memoir pinpoint Mock’s re-defining of realness as the crux of her memoir, but these reviews have not thoroughly analyzed the ways Mock displays her “realness” and how “realness” rejects “passing.” Crunk Feminist Collective states, “Janet Mock certainly challenges the notion that hegemonic cissexist standards of beauty, particularly the notion that trans* women should be able to ‘pass,’ is a goal to aspire to. Over time, for Janet being ‘real’ means living in her truth, participating in loving relationships, being accountable to others, and following her passions.” Mock, as Crunk Feminist Collective points out, clearly disputes that the goal of the trans* woman should be to “pass.” Instead, Mock focuses on living her life as herself instead of worrying about “passing”: this is what “realness” is. While Crunk Feminist Collective highlights that “passing” is the goal and “realness” clashes with “passing,” this blog does not explain why “passing” is the goal for trans* women, and it does not think through the relationship between “passing” and “realness” fully. In addition, another review from Marcie Bianco asserts:

Realness is not “passing,” neither is it “conforming.” What Mock indicates in this passage [about authenticity] is the complexity of a person’s cultural subjectivity, one that is always intersectional, and one whose meanings largely depend on the cultural spaces in which one circulates. What a person can do is to speak her “truth”—she can speak who she is, give agency to her being, and wrest control of her self and her body from the dominant culture.

What Bianco importantly highlights in Mock’s memoir is that one’s subjectivity depends upon the people around that person, but that this person can “speak her truth”—or declare who she is
to others—and she will gain agency of herself and her own body from others. Bianco bluntly states that “realness” is not “passing,” and that the way to be “real,” according to Mock, is to speak her truth instead of holding back. Both Crunk Feminist Collective and Bianco emphasize that “realness” is not about “passing” as anything. Mock’s “realness” is about living as a black trans* woman and being herself, despite what others say. While these two authors have nicely summed up what Mock’s redefining of “realness” is, neither of them delve into the specifics of “passing,” why “realness” is important for certain groups of trans* people, and how even though Mock does “pass,” she does not “pass.” In other words, Mock is able to live her life as a woman, like individuals who pass as cisgender. But Mock freely identifies as a trans* woman, unlike individuals who pass as cisgender. Mock is able to live out her “realness” because she has certain privileges. I will discuss these privileges, but first, we must ask ourselves, why is “passing” so important for trans* women?

“Passing” can be important for trans* women, but others, who are uncomfortable with trans* women, also strongly encourage “passing.” “Passing” for trans* women is important for safety reasons and for their own self-image. Although Mock makes it clear that she thinks “passing” and the assumptions of “passing” are damaging to trans* individuals as a whole, I maintain that there are valid reasons why some trans* women “pass,” at least in the world that we live in right now. As I will discuss later, “passing” prevents violence for trans* women and also can offer confirmation to themselves that they are indeed the gender they identify as. However, as Mock argues, if the goal for trans* women is to “pass” as women, then, normally, this woman’s goal is not necessarily to “pass” as a woman. Her goal is to be (and to be read as) a woman. This rhetoric—saying trans* women are “passing” instead of “being” women—is harmful to how the world views trans* individuals (as deceitful and as “unreal”). Today, it is
obvious that some communities fear trans* individuals and believe they are deceitful. For example, North Carolina just recently passed a bill that requires all individuals (read: trans* individuals) to use the bathroom that corresponds with the gender on their birth certificate. Even if these trans* individuals have had surgery (and have not changed their birth certificate) and/or can be read as their gender identity (a trans* woman being read as a woman), they are still expected to use the so-called correct bathroom: the bathroom that corresponds with the gender they were declared at birth. This law, as many have pointed out, is difficult to enforce, especially for those trans* individuals who pass as cisgender. There isn’t someone monitoring bathrooms, asking for birth certificates. This monitoring is done by people who read trans* individuals and make unfair, invasive assumptions about their genitalia and their identities. Clearly, this law encourages the policing of trans* individuals (those who may not use the supposed correct bathroom) and promotes the notion that trans* individuals are trying to deceive other people. At the same time, this law encourages passing as cisgender. Those who match the expectations of the gender binary are less likely to be questioned under such laws. While it is advantageous they will not be harassed, laws such as these pressure trans* individuals to hide their trans* identities to make others comfortable. In other words, trans* individuals are encouraged to “pass” so that violence will not be brought upon them. However, Mock argues that trans* individuals, especially those who may be read as the gender they express outwardly, need to share their stories to resist this hiding.

One of the ways that Mock’s “realness” differs from passing as cis is that she shares her story with the world, particularly through this memoir. Many early transsexual women’s biographies (and autobiographies), according to Sandy Stone, were used to show an exaggerated femininity to deny any maleness, or to forget a male ever existed. These books would erase large
portions of transsexual women’s lives: transsexual women who could pass as a cisgender woman attempted to ignore how they were raised—as a boy—and erased any possible nuances of their gender. Erasing these parts of a trans individual, according to Halberstam, recasts “the act of passing as deception, dishonestly, and fraud” (48). As I discuss earlier, Mock agrees that passing as cisgender is something that is conflated with deception. But Mock also believes that passing as cis is unhealthy. When Mock does not tell Aaron, her boyfriend, that she is a trans* woman, and she feels trapped. She writes, “You lose touch with yourself: The self you know, the you deep inside, is obscured by a stack of untold stories. And I had been groomed to believe that they were all I had in this world, and the keeping of them was vital to my survival” (11). Growing up as a trans* woman, Mock was told that she must keep her story to herself because people would not accept her as a woman. However, in this memoir, Mock shares much of her life and does not remove anything that might be embarrassing or painful. As Bianco says, “And [Mock] tells us, and Aaron, everything—from being sexually molested as a child to flying to Thailand for her bottom surgery.” Mock’s “being real” means not hiding anything, whereas passing as cisgender means a trans* individual must hide certain aspects of their life.

In addition, unlike these early transsexual biographies, Mock does not erase the transition or the in-between stages in her memoir. Stone claims that early biographers wrote transsexual women as “go[ing] from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between” (225). In other words, these stories do not show an “in between” or transition stage. In fact, early biographies erased any “in between” stages: these biographies demonstrate a clear division between pre-surgery (they still claim to be men and only express the desire to become a woman) and post-surgery (as professional stripper Hedy Jo Star writes, “In the instant that I awoke from the anaesthetic, I realized that I had finally become a woman”).
Erasing any “in between” stages in these stories validated these women’s womanhood. To Star, the surgery was what made her a “real” woman, and therefore surgery was necessary. Also, the surgery’s purpose (and the way the surgery is described by these transsexual women) is for women like Star to be able to pass as cisgender women. Mock’s memoir, however, does not include a clear division of man-to-woman; Mock shows us the “in between,” but also a blending and a dissonance of the masculinity forced onto her and femininity she desires. As a child, when Mock is dared to try on a dress and run across the park, Mock feels “lovely in the muumuu, which flirted with [her] skin as the Oahu trades blew moist kisses at [her]” (18). Mock continues to explain how Grandma Pearl scolds him, and shortly after the scolding, Mock’s mother whispers to Mock, “You’re not supposed to wear dresses” (21). Unlike early transsexual women, Mock actually illustrates how she enjoys wearing the muumuu, even on her body that is read as male. In this memory, there is a disagreement between the sex Mock was declared at birth (male) and the gender Mock wishes to express (female/femininity) clash. Here, Mock draws our attention to the gender binary. Mock shows the conflict (at least, according to her family) of uniting male and female traits (the in-between state of Mock). Unlike early transsexual women who had surgery, Mock does not wish to erase the in-between-ness. Becoming a woman, as Mock shows readers, is a process, and does not simply happen because of surgery. Although Mock receives surgery, she does not want to pass as a cisgender woman. In her memoir, Mock reminds us that “passing” encourages trans* people to hide their past, especially the in-between stages, and keep their stories to themselves. When Mock shows us her in-between-ness and her process of becoming a woman in her own eyes, she challenges the traditional concealment and neatness of these stories.
Mock also does not erase any stories from her memoir that may challenge her womanhood. Mock reveals, “I grew to be certain about who I was, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t a time when I was learning the world, sure, unstable, wobbly, living somewhere between confusion, discovery and conviction” (16). For example, as Mock was growing up, she did not all of a sudden start expressing bold or exaggerated femininity outwardly, such as wearing dresses, high heels, and some of the things that Mock does later in the book. Instead, Mock starts off small, by allowing her friend Wendi to pluck her eyebrows and put silver eyeshadow on her. Wendi tells Mock that no one would notice because it was “natural-looking,” which is exactly what Mock wanted at this time (113). Early on, Mock explains, “I didn’t want to stick out like Wendi” (106). Some scholars may read this scene as Mock being ashamed of her trans* identity, or as Mock simply wanting to skip over the in-between part and go from a male body to having a fully feminine body, like early transsexual women. However, I argue that this example illustrates Mock’s process of trying new things and of pushing gender boundaries that her world had set up. Mock was confused, but as she points out, “The fact that I admit to being uncertain doesn’t discount my womanhood. It adds value to it” (16). When Mock describes her uncertainty of womanhood, this disputes the passing identity that is expected of trans* women.

When Mock shares her story—her full story—her in-between state, her uncertainty and her confusion, these things challenge the typical autobiographies and biographies of trans* women who have had surgery. In addition, Mock’s full story challenges the notion of passing as cisgender. Publishing a memoir that explores in-between-ness and uncertainty outs one as an “imperfect” trans* woman. This negates passing as cisgender and exhibits what Mock calls her “realness.” Mock is “real” because she shares her true story; she does not “pass” as anything or anyone. She is herself—a woman, a trans* woman.
Although I believe “realness” is a freeing alternative to “passing,” it is also unattainable for many trans* individuals. Many trans* individuals simply cannot or do not want to share their stories with everyone. As Ari Stillman elucidates,

For many, passing as the gender they identify as serves as a means to achieving gender euphoria (a sense of satisfaction and comfort with one’s perceived gender)...Passing is also a safety concern in many cases; the less visibly different from the mainstream cisgender society one appears, the less one needs to worry about possible discrimination and violence.

Passing as cisgender, especially during the early stages of transition or post-surgery, can provide pleasure and confirmation for certain trans* individuals, as we see with the transsexual women’s biographies and autobiographies. In addition, “passing” is also a matter of safety: “passing” provides the ability to have a job and a house, and prevents violence. In 2015, there were at least 21 trans men and women killed in the U.S. One of these trans* women who were killed was Keisha Jenkins, a trans* college student and trans* activist. Jenkins was described by her family as someone vivacious, “comfortable in her own skin,” and an activist who promoted equality of trans* individuals (Whelan). Jenkins, much like Mock, identified as a trans woman openly. But Jenkins’ story, unlike Mock’s, ended tragically. Jenkins’ murder, as well as other trans* individuals who were murdered, clearly shows the transphobia that exists today. But as we can see, “passing” can protect people from transphobic violence and can help those who do not want to tell their stories yet to gain confidence to do so.

Another issue with Mock’s definition of “realness” is it is limited; “realness” clearly targets trans* individuals who would be able to “pass.” Let’s recall part of Mock’s criteria for “being,” or “realness:” “If a trans woman who knows herself and operates in the world as a
woman is seen, perceived, treated, and viewed as a woman, isn’t she just being herself? She isn’t passing; she is merely being.” (155). The key phrase in this quote is “seen, perceived, treated, and viewed as a woman.” A trans* woman who is seen, perceived, treated, and viewed as a woman in society is most likely going to be able to “pass” as a cisgender woman, or, be read as a woman (and not necessarily be read as a trans* woman). A woman like Janet Mock, who has feminine curves, who meets feminine beauty expectations, who has had gender confirmation surgery, will have an easier time being treated and viewed as a woman than a trans* woman who may not meet beauty expectations. I am not using this information to criticize Mock. In fact, she frequently calls out her privilege in *Redefining Realness*. However, it is important to explore Mock’s privileges because they are not available for all trans* individuals.

One of the privileges that allows trans* individuals like Mock to be read as a woman and to share her “realness” is beauty. One of the most important expectations of cis and trans* women is beauty. Shulamith Firestone argues that beauty standards are deemed more important for women than men, and that the beauty ideal is one of the tools to reinforce “sex class,” or the gender divide. Attempting to meet the beauty ideal, Firestone notes, is vital for women: “If they [women] don’t try to fit this ideal, the penalties are enormous: their social legitimacy is at stake” (126). Beauty for women—for cis women, but perhaps even more for trans* women—becomes a way to express their validity, or “realness” and worth as a woman. Devan Diaz, a Hispanic trans woman who works in activism, builds on this idea specifically for trans* women: “There’s this expectation that trans women perform this very binary performance of womanhood using beauty. I feel this expectation to perform hyper-feminine presentation. I think it's gone from wanting to be a very binary identity, wanting to be as close to heteronormativity as possible” (Sicardi). In other words, trans* women are expected to be hyper-feminine in their appearance,
and this is translated into beauty. Trans* women like Mock, who are able to achieve some sort of
beauty in the eyes of society, are more likely to be validated as women and be “worth”
something, and will therefore be able to share their stories and their “realness.” Trans* women
who do not meet this beauty ideal are less likely to be taken seriously because, as Firestone
highlights, being beautiful means a woman is more like a woman. Therefore, Mock’s definition
of “realness” excludes women who are not perceived as “real” women by the rest of the world.

Although Mock’s definition of “realness” is limited to only those who can pass as cis,
Mock’s “realness” does create a space to hear stories from people who have the privilege to pass
as cis. As Roxane Gay says in Bad Feminist, “To have privilege in one or more areas does not
mean you are wholly privileged. Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult, but it is
really all that is expected. What I remind myself, regularly, is this: the acknowledgment of my
privilege is not a denial of the ways I have been and am marginalized, the ways I have suffered”
(17). Gay recognizes that privilege is a complex topic, and it cannot be reduced down to a binary.
One is not wholly privileged or wholly disadvantaged. One person is privileged in some ways
and disadvantaged in others. Mock’s memoir clearly exemplifies Gay’s argument about
privilege. Mock writes, “We must recognize that we all have different experiences of oppression
and privilege, and I recognize that my ability to blend as cis is one conditional privilege that does
not negate the fact that I experience the world as a trans woman” (237). Although Mock has the
privilege to “pass,” she still is a trans* woman and is often treated like she is not a “real” woman,
or is asked invasive questions. Mock also grew up as a lower class black individual who was a
sex worker. One cannot say that Mock is “fully” privileged even though she is beautiful, had
gender confirmation surgery, and is able to share her “realness” with the world. Mock’s
complicated privilege is important to her “realness” because it shows the complexity of her life.
Mock states, “[the] ability to ‘pass’ negates their [people who cannot ‘pass’] experiences because they are more often perceived to be trans*. The misconception of equating ease of life with ‘passing’ must be dismantled in our culture” (236-267). Although being able to pass as cis allows trans* people to escape physical and verbal violence more easily, this does not mean that these individuals do not have a more complex experience of privilege and oppression. This is why “realness” is particularly important to those trans* individuals who can “pass”: by explaining their own complex privilege, they refute the idea that people who can “pass” automatically have an easy life and are wholly privileged. Thus, trans* individuals who share their complex privilege show more than what is on the surface. This sharing negates “passing” and hiding their trans* identity.

“Realness” also enables individuals like Mock to question the preference for cisgender individuals. Throughout this memoir, Mock counters the notion that cisgender (or those who can pass as cisgender) individuals are the norm. For example, if we just look at the cover of Mock’s memoir, we may believe she is a cis woman; nothing on the front of the cover screams that Mock is a trans* woman. However, once we read the pages inside, readers find out that Mock is a trans* woman who is proud to claim she is a trans* woman. This memoir is symbolic of the way trans* people are read on the street. On the street, one may read Mock as a cis woman. However, if Mock decided to disclose she is trans*, then these are the “inner pages.” Mock’s memoir as this symbol challenges the idea that all trans* individuals are read or can somehow be read as trans* individuals. Therefore, by telling their stories, these trans* individuals who are read as cisgender challenge both the notion that everyone is cisgender from birth and the notion that trans* people are always legible as trans* people. Mock explains, “The work begins by each of us recognizing that cis people are not more valuable or legitimate and that trans people who
blend as cis are not more valuable or legitimate. We must recognize, discuss, and dismantle this hierarchy that polices bodies and values certain ones over others” (237). By telling their stories and explaining their complex privileges and confusion, or by telling their “realness,” trans* individuals who can pass as cisgender can question and dismantle the belief that passing for cis is the most important goal.

Mock’s “realness” is complex and only available to some trans* individuals, but “realness” challenges and is an alternative to passing as cisgender, however, much work is still needed to be done with dismantling cisgender as the more privileged group. One of the ideas that stems from privileging cisgender (or cisgender looking) individuals is automatically “ciss-ing” people, or reading and assuming people are cisgender when they look cisgender. In other words, some trans* individuals can be dismissed as cisgender. Trans* individuals who can pass as cis may be read as cis, and then automatically assumed to be cisgender without asking. Though this may seem like a small issue compared to other trans* issues, combatting any and all attempts to misgender trans* people may help them tell their truths and help challenge the idea that everyone who looks cisgender is cisgender. For instance, a trans* individual who went to a Janet Mock book signing was “ciss-ed” by Mock herself. This person asked Mock a question about “passing”: “How do you think it would help the trans community if more transwomen who have the privilege of being mistaken for cis make their stories public like you did?” Mock was confused, so she asked this person to rephrase the question. This person says they “panicked,” and made the mistake of saying, “Well, you [Mock] pass…” Mock snapped, “I don’t like the word passing. When I walk down the street, I'm just being. I'm not making a political statement because no one can tell that I'm trans. So,” Mock continued, “would a trans person like to ask a question?” Understandably, Mock read this trans* individual as a cisgender person because of a
Weiss 63

few possible reasons. This person probably passed for cisgender, and perhaps Mock assumed a trans* individual would not use the term “passing.” However, instead of allowing this trans* individual to explain themselves and explain the question further, Mock dismissed them, and dismissed them as a trans* individual. Since Mock is a trans* activist that people may recognize, she is now not “ciss-ed” as much. But the difference between this individual and Mock is that this individual did not get to speak up and explain her story or her “realness” to the room or to Mock. Mock held her belief that cisgender (or cisgender looking) people are not more valuable than others, but in the process of doing this, she also hurt this person that can express their “realness” to help challenge “passing.” Mock’s “realness” is a space for those trans* individuals who can “pass” to tell their stories, but only if these individuals are not shut down first. It is unclear if Mock has responded to this person, but this is a learning moment for us all. “Realness,” like “passing,” has beneficial impacts on trans* lives, but one must also be careful not to privilege “realness” to the point that it negatively impacts other trans* peoples’ lives and senses of self.
NOTES

1 To read more about the “bathroom problem,” I suggest reading Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*, personal accounts from trans* individuals, such as “What It’s Like to Use a Public Bathroom While Trans” by Nico Lang, and current debates about bathroom bills in various states.

2 Idaho, Kansas, Ohio, and Tennessee do not allow trans* individuals to change their gender on their birth certificates.
CONCLUSION

“Passing” has been and is still a much debated topic because of its complexity. A large group of individuals—cis and trans*—deem passing as cisgender as disingenuous and fake because of racial and sexual passing. But, trans* individuals can also pass as cisgender for safety and for identity confirmation. Most of the typical notions present “passing” as necessary or as deceitful. However, my project intends to challenge these typical notions of gender “passing.” All of my chapters show how passing as cis can be complex and nuanced. Cal’s passing as cis in Middlesex is necessary and “good,” especially because Cal chose to pass as a cisgender man and because Cal can pass as cis, which allows him agency. Nevertheless, passing as cis causes Cal anxiety about his identity and his safety. My second chapter illustrates how even though Joss Moody in Trumpet can pass as cisgender during his life, the medical and legal communities attempt to rewrite Joss’ narrative of his own life. Finally, my third chapter shows how Janet Mock, who can pass as cisgender, can choose not to “pass,” even though this is only available for a small group of trans* individuals. Passing as cisgender is much more than the simple good/evil dichotomy.

Reading these characters the way they wish to be read—meaning, as the identity they portray to the world—is central to this project. Most scholars read Middlesex as a novel that reaffirms normative gender identity and exploits intersexuality. However, I argue that Middlesex makes it clear that Cal wishes to be read as a man. Reading Cal as trans* actually gives him agency in the novel. Additionally, though some scholars insist on reading Joss as a cross-dresser, it’s clear that Joss identifies as a trans* man; he does not play with his gender expression in any place in the novel; it remains fixed during his life. Reading Janet Mock as a (trans*) woman is vital to understanding her as a person, but it is also important to understand that others can read
her as a cisgender woman. Mock, however, wants to be read as a trans* woman. Unlike Mock, Cal and Joss intend to be read as cisgender men. Reading these characters the way they wish to be read is the simplest take away from my project: try not to assume people want to identify a certain way. We can use this in our own lives: ask all people how they identify and what pronouns they use. Take this as truth instead of (purposely or inadvertently) misgendering/misidentifying individuals. If a trans* person wishes to pass as cisgender, think about honoring that decision before lecturing them about the good and the evils of passing as cisgender.

In addition, each of these chapters show the queerness of passing as cisgender. Texts that include trans* individuals that pass as cis, as I explain in the introduction of this project, show an inconsistency (or as Sedgwick says, a “gap”) between trans* identity and how the trans* person is read (as cisgender). Therefore, this inconsistency indicates that trans* identities who pass can be read as queer. Although the trans* person who passes as cis may not identify as queer, their inconsistent and dissonant identity can still be read as queer. While each of the chapters show trans* identities that pass as cis, each chapter also explores the queerness of these trans* characters: Cal identifies as intersex only to his readers, but lives his life as a cisgender man; After Joss’ death, his identity now has two narratives that clash with each other; Although Janet Mock can pass as cis, she does not choose to reject her trans* identity. Instead of “passing,” she chooses “realness,” or to share her story. As I argue in this chapter about Mock’s memoir, “realness,” like “passing,” can be beneficial for trans* individuals, but is exclusive to those who can be read as cisgender. All of these inconsistencies, gaps, and dissonances appear to stem from the fact that these trans* characters are able to be read as cisgender by others. Reading these
“passing” trans* individuals’ inconsistencies allows us to understand the complex nature of passing as cis.

In the future, I would like to explore the tension between some queer individuals’ pressures to live as an unintelligible gender and trans* individuals who pass as cisgender. As Patricia Elliot asks, “If non-normative embodiments are to be celebrated only in their unintelligible forms, what becomes of those who embrace more conventional or intelligible gender categories?” (2). In other words, if we only celebrate non-normative gender identities, like trans* identities, because of their non-normativity or unintelligibility, then what happens when these non-normative people choose a more intelligible gender? The issue with this idea is that these non-normative identities who want a more intelligible gender identity are caught in between: even though cisgender identities are clearly privileged in our world, queer theorists and queer communities tend to privilege unintelligible identities, as I explain with Butler’s interview in the introduction of this project. Therefore, trans* individuals who can pass as cisgender are not quite cisgender enough to escape the anxiety and assumed deceit and trickery that passing as cis brings. However, trans* individuals who can pass (like other supposedly stable gender identities) are not quite queer enough for some queer communities. These trans* individuals do not necessarily “belong” anywhere. I do think that Janet Mock’s “realness” can substitute passing as cisgender, but I also think that it can be dangerous for those trans* individuals who can pass as cis. This friction between cisgender-ness, trans* identities who pass as cis, and queerness is something that needs to be further researched.

Another idea that should be looked into is how family members and partners of trans* people cope with and transition with a trans* person. In Trumpet, I analyze Millie and Colman alongside Joss because they are also affected by Joss’ trans* identity. However, few
scholars have analyzed Joss’ family along with him. It seems as though this topic—how family
or partners cope with trans* individuals—is left untouched or purposely ignored, and it is unclear
why this is. If we study how trans*people feel and how family and partners feel in tandem, this
may give us an idea how to make the transitions for both the trans*person and the family/partner
easier.

Finally, analyzing the concept of passing as cisgender by examining individual cases
helps us understand how and why trans* pass (or do not want to pass) as cisgender. While this
project includes interesting information about texts, most of these characters in this project are
fictional. The next step is to interview trans* individuals who can pass as cis, and ask them about
passing as cisgender: particularly, ask these individuals how they feel about passing as cis, how
does it feel when they do pass as cis, and how does it feel when they do not pass as cis. After
these initial questions, though, perhaps we can ask these trans* individuals other questions that
may provoke deeper answers, such as, “How do you think the negativity that surrounds the
concept of passing as cisgender has influenced your views on passing as cis?” and “How do you
see passing as cisgender as complex?” Perhaps my project will provide this future work with a
starting point as to how to approach passing as cisgender as a more complex subject.


