

(The Gender Centre advise that this article may not be current and as such certain content, including but not limited to persons, contact details and dates may not apply. Where legal authority or medical related matters are cited, responsibility lies with the reader to obtain the most current relevant legal authority and/or medical publication.)

I Did But See Her (or Him) Passing By

Jamison Green's Thoughts on the Much Discussed Issue of 'Passing'

From [International Foundation for Gender Education](#) by Jamison Green

Article appeared in Polare magazine: February 2001 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



Jamison Green: We need to be talking about passing as if it doesn't matter, as if it is not what is important.

Transgender Tapestry magazine, published quarterly by the International Foundation of Gender Education, has instituted

a new feature over the past year or so, called 'The Journal'. Editor Dallas Denny solicits topical essays and then asks other writers to respond to the ideas in a subsequent issue. The format has provoked some very thought provoking content.

In Issue #95, Fall 2001, the topic was 'Passing', and the invited contributors were Holly Boswell and Jessica Xavier, two long-time trans activists with very different personal and political styles. I admire and respect them both. They use different entry points to the concept of passing, but both acknowledge the harm that is within the seductive lure of passing, and the emptiness of the privilege with which passing tempts us. Here is my response to some of the issues

I understand that many trans people are terrified of not passing, and that this is a horrible fear to live with

raised.

Holly Boswell quotes Leslie Feinberg: "It is passing that is historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats of violence ...".

I disagree with the premise that passing is historically new. This is an unprovable statement, and there is considerable anthropological and historical evidence to the contrary. Feinberg's statement is a rhetorical device intended to invoke compassion for those who cannot or do not 'pass' and to challenge those transpeople who do pass to step out of the closet; it is not a statement of absolute truth. Passing does not unequivocally mean hiding or invisibility. Everyone has some aspect of their life that is hidden, one for which they might fear vilification if it were common knowledge in certain circles. This situation is not unique to gender variant or sexual minority people.

Further, I understand that many trans people are terrified of not passing, and that this is a horrible fear to live with. What we need to be working toward, on the political as well as the social front, is freedom to realise "a greater sense of congruity between our inner and outer being" (which is what Holly advocates beyond passing) regardless of what this looks like to others!

I don't agree with either Holly's statement that "passing inevitably reinforces sex role stereotyping, sexism and gender duality," Why is this inevitable?

Women who pass as women have been quite successful at breaking down sex stereotyping, sexism and gender duality in the feminist movement.

Men who pass as men can do the same thing with respect to breaking down sex role stereotypes, and some have been working hard to do just that.

You don't have to look at gender-queer or even the gender-variant to understand and speak up for freedom of gender expression. Our ability to hide and assimilate is not new and it is not difficult to understand why, facing the reactions of those who oppose and ridicule us, so few transpeople 'out' themselves or demand dignity or equality in spite of our difference.

Jessica's piece discusses how passing privilege for gay men, lesbians and bisexual people has 'dumbed down' the identity politics of the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual movement, reducing it to the "we're just like you, we just do something different in the privacy of our own bedrooms" argument, and perhaps passing transpeople have fallen prey to the same rhetoric, trying hard to believe that the privacy of their genital difference should be glossed over politically and they should have equal rights, too, just leave their bodies covered, thank you.

I have long agreed with Jessica that this line isn't going to work for transpeople. Our collective variance is much greater than that, and if we are truly to achieve social justice, we cannot fight only for the ones who look 'nice'.

We have to fight for everyone, because our issues are more pervasive throughout our lives than just who we have sex with in private.

Many Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual people have the same social issues as we do, even if they don't regard themselves as trans, and whether they pass or not.

I am grateful for Jessica's observation that (she estimates) "90 percent of transsexual men eventually gain passing privilege. But spending half their lives developing queer consciousness within their lesbian communities, many transsexual men are not only aware of, but also ambivalent about, their passing privilege"

Although I don't think she meant this exactly, I feel compelled to point out that there is no statistical proof that a majority of transmen have prior lesbian experience.

Jessica's text also implies that most F.T.M.s are straight (attracted to women post-transition); this is also not statistically verifiable. My exposure to transmen causes me to estimate that only 60 percent have had any lesbian experience or connection to queer culture, and that roughly 30 percent of F.T.M.s identify as gay men, whether they had exposure to queer culture prior to transition or not.

I would not generalise that exposure to queer culture prior to transition predisposes one's post-transition sexual orientation toward homosexuality. I would generalise that most of the few transmen who are politically active and most willing to be publicly 'out' have been through the political mill in queer culture, have had their consciousness raised, and bring to their transactivism considerable organising experience.

Some of us, though we may be new to the trans scene, have been politically active around sexism, racism and homophobia for decades. If we are the only transmen that are visible, it is not surprising that Jessica and others would draw conclusions like these, but I assure you that transmen are more diverse than that.

We have our sexist pigs, homophobes and transphobes, too, Jessica points out something else I've often said; "We will never be non-transsexual" (or non-transgendered), whether we pass or not. When our sense of congruity between our inner and outer being is stronger and we feel more at home in our bodies, regardless of the shape or sex of those bodies, and we no longer have to fear having our difference discovered, then we can rest.

Until then, whether we talk about passing as if it's either "important/necessary to pass" or "politically incorrect to pass because it's bad to look good" all that does is continue to make everyone feel bad.

We need to be talking about passing as if it doesn't matter, as if it is not what is important. Because what is important is that for all of us the goal is freedom to be who we are, regardless of our difference or variance, regardless of what we look like or what gender we identify with, for what part of the day, so long as we are not harming another person.

What our genitals look like, or whom we love, or how we need to change our bodies (or not change them) should not matter with respect to our ability to live safe, productive, rewarding lives as full members of society.

To that end, I think invisibility is more dangerous than passing *per se*. It is one thing to be invisible to have people react in shock, shame, intolerance and hatred when your difference is exposed, whether or not that exposure happens against your will; it's another thing to pass and have your difference understood and respected even if it is not revealed all the time.

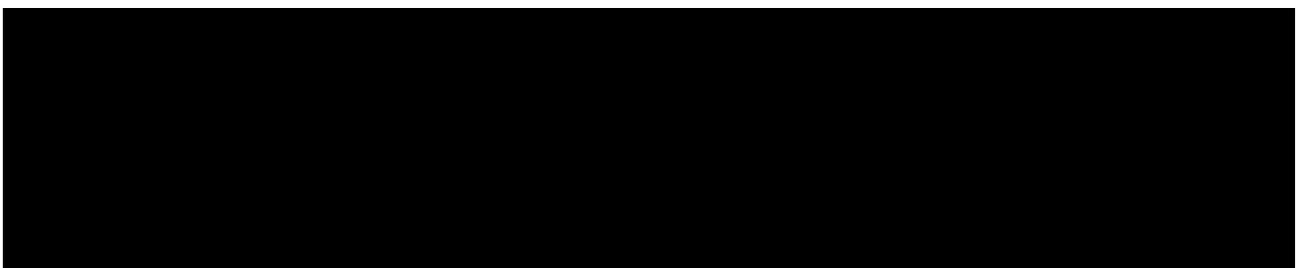
Jamison "James" Green

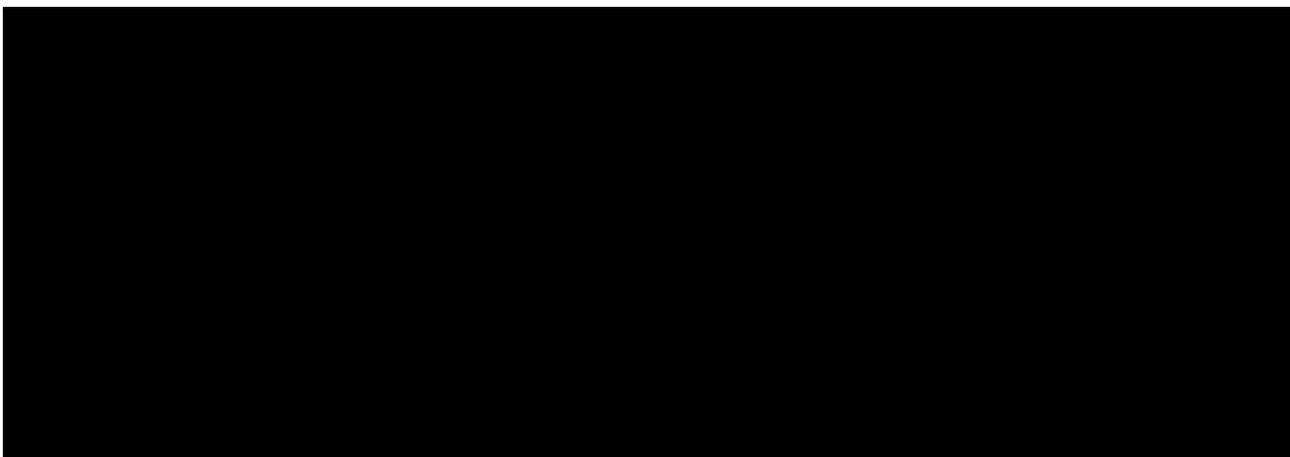
From Wikipedia:  Jamison "James" Green is known as an activist for the legal protection, medical access, safety, civil rights and dignity of transgender and transsexual people. He has published several essays and articles, and writes a column for PlanetOut.com. He has appeared in eight documentary films.

He chairs the board of Gender Education and Advocacy, a non-profit educational organization, and serves on the boards of the Transgender Law and Policy Institute and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health. He is also a board member of the Equality Project and an advisory board member of the National Centre for Transgender Equality. He was the leader of F.T.M. International from March 1991 to August 1999 and a member of the Human Rights Campaign Business Council until late 2007, when he resigned over the organisation's stance on transgender inclusion in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.

He is the author of *Becoming a Visible Man*, which received the 2004 Sylvia Rivera Award for Best Book in Transgender Studies from the Centre for Lesbian and Gay Studies. The book combines two strands: autobiographical writing about Green's transition from living as a lesbian to living as a heterosexual man, as well as broader commentary about the status of transsexual men in society. It was also a finalist for a 2004 Lambda Literary Award.

The following video of James Green's speech at the 2000 San Francisco Pride event is courtesy of You Tube and You Tube Subscriber M.R. Mahoney.





Becoming a Visible Man
Author: James Green
Publisher: Vanderbilt University Press
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0826514561

From Google Books:  Written by a leading activist in the transgender movement, *Becoming a Visible Man* is an artful and compelling inquiry into the politics of gender. Jamison Green combines candid autobiography with informed analysis to offer unique insight into the multiple challenges of the female-to-male transsexual experience, ranging from encounters with prejudice and strained relationships with family to the development of an F.T.M. community and the realities of surgical sex

reassignment. For more than a decade, Green has provided educational programs on gender variance issues for corporations, law enforcement agencies, social science conferences and classes, continuing legal education, religious education, and medical clubs. His comprehensive knowledge of the processes and problems encountered by transgendered and transsexual people - as well as his legal advocacy work to help ensure that gender variant people have access to the same rights and opportunities as others - enable him to explain the issues as no transsexual author has previously done. Brimming with frank and often poignant recollections of Green's own experiences - including his childhood struggles with identity and his years as a lesbian parent prior to his sex reassignment surgery - the book examines transsexualism as a human condition, and sex reassignment as one of the choices that some people feel compelled to make in order to manage their gender variance. Relating the F.T.M. psyche and experience to the social and political forces at work in American society, *Becoming a Visible Man* also speaks consciously of universal principles that concern us all, particularly the need to live one's life honestly, openly and passionately.

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.