

Digital passing: “I died once, so I could live. Perhaps that is my real story”

Big Data & Society
 April–June: 1–15
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 DOI: 10.1177/20539517261455755
journals.sagepub.com/home/bds



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Abstract

As biometric data is widely considered not only equal to biometric traits but also equivalent to identity, international actors have increasingly conditioned movement on biometric registration and identification. While identity fraud is considered a criminal offence, a growing scholarship explores the implications of unjust data politics and practice in the context of migration management. Hence, this paper aims to offer an alternative interpretation of identity fraud “committed” by individuals who suffer violence and inhumane conditions in conflict situations or refugee camps, during transit, at border crossings, in detention facilities in an era of digitalized identity management and mobility control. By using insights from Holocaust studies, this paper recalls the matter of identity performance during the Holocaust (passing with assumed identities) and conceptualizes digital passing by exploring similarities and differences regarding imagination, resistance, and survival. When not only migration is increasingly illegalized, but the “global gulag” also becomes a reality, digital passing can provide an escape, however temporarily, from dataveillance that is concerned with patterns and correlations in data, instead of acknowledging the complexity of human trajectories and identities. Cover stories are not just a last resort but also a means by which “unwanted” individuals can take responsibility for their own lives to avoid exclusion, violence or premature death.

Keywords

Digital passing, biometric recognition, biometric surveillance, identity fraud, assumed identity, illegal(ized) migration

Introduction

Toward the end of Imre Kertész’s *Fatelessness* (2004 [1975]: 260), its main character, the Jewish-Hungarian adolescent György Köves, seeks to understand his own role in the events that resulted in his internment in a concentration camp upon his return to Budapest in the spring of 1945:

‘So it’s us who’re the guilty ones, is it? Us, the victims!’ I tried explaining that it wasn’t a crime; all that was needed was to admit it [our role in events], meekly, simply, merely as a matter of reason, a point of honor, I might put it that way. It was impossible . . . to take everything away from me, impossible for me to be neither winner, nor loser, for me not to be right and for me not to be mistaken that I was neither the cause nor the effect of anything; they should try to see, I almost pleaded, that I could not swallow that idiotic bitterness, that I should merely be innocent.

While literary figures such as György Köves lived to contemplate the tension between “fate” (chance) and “freedom”

(agency) as a coping strategy for surviving the “unspeakable betrayal” that characterizes trauma (Edkins, 2013: 2–9), millions perished in concentration camps or mass graves because they were unwilling or unable to resist identification as Jews or Roma during the Holocaust and the Porajmos. Decades later, a shared understanding that “none of us are exempt from data politics and practice” because “data determine how we can or cannot move through the world and whether we are considered to be threats, risks, victims, or assets” (Leese et al., 2021: 6) has mobilized practitioners and scholars to examine the implications of datification across domains—such as identity management in

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the context of population and migration control—that are simultaneously securitized, criminalized, and digitalized.

Promising fraud-proof and cost-effective control over individuals and their mobility, digitalized and increasingly biometrics-based identification technologies (hereinafter “identification technologies”) conflated the analytical distinction between identity and identification in IT systems long ago (Grünenberg et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2014: 18). As a result, contemporary border (and access) control technologies not only facilitate easy access and eligibility but also enable the exclusion of those whose “true identity” or legal status is deemed problematic according to the logic of bioborders (Amelung et al., 2021; Amore, 2006; Wienroth and Amelung, 2023). Acts that challenge legally established borders, such as (digital) identity fraud, have been criminalized regardless of whether the offenders are citizens or non-citizens long ago (Baechler, 2020; Casey and Jaquet-Chiffelle, 2019; Koops et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2018).

Yet, the widespread deployment of identification technologies has generated significant risks to human rights and security. These arise from coding categorization and sorting functions, poor-quality biometric data, algorithmic biases, and false matches (Bowker and Star, 1999; Magnet, 2011), as well as blurred boundaries between recognition and surveillance (Schoemaker et al., 2023; Weitzberg et al., 2021). Additional concerns include the violence associated with biometric registration (Glouftsiou and Casaglia, 2022) and the exclusion experienced across humanitarian work, social welfare, refugee protection, and mobility management (Masiero, 2024; Molnar, 2023; Schoemaker et al., 2021; Tazzioli, 2019). This paper therefore offers an alternative interpretation of identity fraud “committed” in an era of digitalized identity management and mobility control by individuals subjected to violence and inhumane conditions in conflict zones, refugee camps, during transit (Van Reisen et al., 2023), at border crossings, or in detention facilities (Barnes, 2022; Peterie, 2024) as a consequence of (attempts at) identification.

Inspired by calls for “different bodies of theory” to be included in analyses to improve the understanding of the implications of identification technologies for vulnerable individuals (Martin and Taylor, 2021: 50), this paper conceptualizes practices of identity fraud undertaken for the purposes of escape and survival as forms of *digital passing*. It unpacks its main tenets by drawing on insights from Holocaust studies—where survival often depended on faking documents and life stories—and on contemporary practices of “appropriation” documented primarily within the autonomy of migration (AoM) scholarship (Scheel, 2019; others).

While shaping legal and ethical debates on the implications of biopolitics (Ajana, 2013; Lebovic, 2015; Pugliese, 2010), the deployment of identification technologies also influenced discussions about securitized citizenship in

societies privileged enough to anticipate and mitigate risks (Müller, 2004: 284–288). These discussions encompassed the “neurotic citizens” governed by technologies of fear to defend their freedom (Isin, 2004), well before the “refugee (protection) crisis” (2015) emerged in Europe. Elsewhere, when the Israeli Knesset passed the Biometric Database Law in 2009, activists and Holocaust survivors compared biometric surveillance to the blue numbers tattooed on forearms—physical traces embedded in the body—in camps (Lebovic, 2015: 862–865; Marciano, 2019). While providing or denying access to services based on identification-based eligibility has become normalized globally (Lyon, 2009: 60–61), “technosecurity” solutions disproportionately affect forced migrants, stateless persons, asylum seekers, and refugees (Couldry and Mejias, 2023; Skinner, 2020). Actually, such a wide and well-integrated array of legal and technological instruments is used to control the mobility of people from the Global South that Besteman (2020) coined the term “militarized global apartheid” to illustrate the problem. Used to prevent or manage behaviors—disorder, terror, revolt, violence, radicalism, extremism—perceived as threats to privileged populations, this system can easily contribute to what *The Intercept* termed the “global gulag,” capturing both the conditions facing deportees in detention centers worldwide and the racist violence accompanying deportation (Turse and Valdez, 2025).

As foreseen in the shadow of the global war on terror more than 20 years ago, identity management was liable to become “less about identity in the sense of identification and more about authorized access” to privileges, such as places, rights, and resources (Muller, 2004: 291). Hence, how identity is recorded, processed, and interpreted has become crucial to decisions about sorting (Bowker and Star, 1999) that precede access and inclusion, as well as denial or exclusion. Personal data stored in databases and embedded in passports, along with the “algorithms for extricating meaning from them [...] is always a construct, an achievement of particular ways of organizing relations between the observer and the things observed” (Visvanathan, 1997 cited by Jasanoff, 2017: 6). However, in the context of population and mobility management, that which is “observed” is not a thing but a *human*, objectified by “its’ recording and construction in the form of a data double” (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000: 613).

Racial and ethnic profiling is prohibited by international (human rights) law. Yet, racism itself has not disappeared, and digital (biometric) identification systems are built on the idea that humans identify one another through bodily traits such as facial features, skin color, or voice (Jain et al., 2011: 1). At the same time, datafication shows that digital constructs can produce errors and gaps between database information and the actual person—the authentic identity (Aradau and Perret, 2022; Harb, 2025; Pollozek and Passoth, 2023: 420). The resulting mess and arbitrary

decisions, just as the real or imagined order data-based technologies claim to serve, are deployed for the purpose of controlling people (Aradau et al., 2026; McCluskey, 2020).

Ethical-philosophical critiques of biometric surveillance can be traced to nineteenth-century physiognomy and eugenics that culminated in the Holocaust (Lebovic, 2015: 845–849). However, while the controversial role of selection processes assisted by technology are well documented both in Holocaust contexts (Black, 2012) and contemporary crimmigration scholarship (Singler and Milivojevic, 2024; Wienroth and Amelung, 2023), studies of migrant coping strategies have not used *digital passing* as an alternative lens on identity fraud. This is even more remarkable given that fraud has not disappeared with biometrics-based surveillance and identification systems (Baechler, 2020; Smith et al., 2018). Nor have the political agency and imagination of illegal(ized) migrants been ignored, as demonstrated by the rich AoM scholarship (Ambrosini and Hajer, 2023; Galis et al., 2022; Safouane, 2018; Scheel, 2019). Although “passing” appears in some analyses, it lacks explicit links to the Holocaust (Lewkowicz, 2023; Weitzberg, 2020a). Hence, by drawing together historical insights from Holocaust studies and Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical work on identity, this paper seeks to deepen understanding of the actions and motives of contemporary “identity tricksters”—a term problematized by Scheel (2019: 112–135)—and illuminate the dehumanizing effects of biometric surveillance in a tech-solutionist world often stripped of empathy.

Methods and structure

Offering an interpretative analysis, this article first elaborates on the *idem* and *ipse* components of identity following Paul Ricoeur (1992). It then unpacks the relationship between identity, identification, and identity management. This is followed by a discussion of how passing has been interpreted in Holocaust studies. Large-scale ethnographic research on contemporary digital passing was not pursued for several reasons. First, lessons from Holocaust studies demonstrate that stories of survivors—those of both the rescuers and the rescued—often emerge only decades later, if at all (Fogelman, 1994; Kidron, 2009; Ofer, 1990; Patek, 2012; Sanderson, 2018). Second, contemporary practices of appropriation must remain undetected—“in the realm of the hidden”—to succeed (Borrelli et al., 2021: 32; Scheel, 2019: 182–209). Finally, collecting empirical data on illegalized practices associated with vulnerable individuals, often exploited for research purposes, would likely require offering material benefits in exchange for their experiences—a solution that would lead to further ethical dilemmas, as indicated by studies on the logic of “aid for pain” (Paragi, 2021).

Hence, the main part of this article conceptualizes *digital passing* and interprets it as a means of bridging the artificial

gap between *idem* and *ipse* created by identification technologies. This conceptualization draws on selected works that explored the diverse ways in which individuals—particularly (forced) migrants and refugees—respond to digitalized practices of migration control (Galis et al., 2022; Glouftsiou and Casaglia, 2022; Kuster and Tsianos, 2022; Lewkowicz, 2023; McCluskey, 2020; Metcalfe, 2021; Scheel, 2019; Tazzioli, 2024; Weitzberg, 2020a). Complementing this stream of scholarship, data from interviews conducted with aid workers in Hungary between the summer of 2024 and spring 2025 (Ślęzak-Belowska and Paragi, 2026: 92–93) is used to highlight that it is not only descendants of colonized people, illegal(ized) migrants, or asylum seekers, that face exclusion as a result of (mis)identification. These informants observed how one segment of non-privileged forced migrants—mostly illiterate Ukrainian Roma citizens, with or without the legal documents required for inclusion under the EU’s temporary protection mechanism (TPM) (Eredics 2024)—navigated the digitalized world as a coping strategy.

Conceptual framework: Identity and identity management

Identity, an extensively researched phenomenon in the social sciences, humanities, and legal studies, has long been a key concept in migration, integration, and citizenship studies (Isin, 1999; Kaya, 2024). However, recent research that has mapped the experiences of migrants from the majority world has either examined civic integration practices in EU countries by incorporating Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of identity without addressing the digital dimension (Pettersson, 2025) or analyzed the harmful impact of identification technologies on identity without unpacking its components (Franko, 2006: 146–149; Glouftsiou and Casaglia, 2022; Grüneberg et al., 2020: 214–215; Kuster and Tsianos, 2022; Pelizza, 2020, 2021; Schoemaker et al., 2021: 15–16).

Ricoeur (1992: 113–168) distinguished the self-reflexive nature of the self (*ipse* identity) from the numerical, or “datafiable” features of *idem* identity. Being intertwined, *idem* denotes the sameness of things or persons—the match between an identifier and an individual—at a given time, while the narrative, so-called *ipse* dimension relates to the individual’s sense of self or selfhood. Imbued with “its own alterity,” the latter remains open to indeterminacy yet is stable over the passage of time (Pettersson, 2025: 206). Recalling Ricoeur (1992: 118), “when we speak of ourselves,” we can recognize two “models of permanence in time . . . : character and keeping one’s word.” To put it differently, it is the narrative (that is, the “identity of the story”) which consolidates the *ipse* by constructing “the identity of the character” (Ricoeur, 1992: 148). Hence, selfhood (that is, the *ipse* dimension of identity) also becomes a matter

of individual responsibility, because the “truth” element appears in narratives about the self, whether recounted or fabricated (Pereira Rodrigues, 2023). Like humans, animals can also have *idem* identity, as demonstrated by the travel documents issued to Ukrainian pets (Sandvik, 2023), but they lack the *ipse*. In a certain sense, the relationship between *idem* and *ipse* components resembles Einstein’s theory of relativity: identity is a unified entity in which the spatial dimension (*idem*, sameness: the match between an identifier and a person at a given point in time) cannot be interpreted without the temporal dimension (*ipse*, selfhood: subject to change over time while preserving continuity and integrity).

Ignoring this irreducibility, states and international organizations have successfully conditioned mobility and access to rights and services on processing only the *idem* components of identity, such as personal and biometric data. Current border regimes are built on the assumption that biometric traits are inalienable, observable by humans, legible by machines, “less prone to manipulation” and “more resistant to identity-related crimes” (Koops et al., 2009: 4). This mechanic understanding has informed contemporary securitization practices (Broeders and Dijstelbloem, 2016; Grüneberg et al., 2020), often described as “biobordering” (Amelung et al., 2021; Amooore, 2006). While such practices are implemented to ensure the safety and security of “neurotic citizens” (Isin, 2004), they also embody the politics of data-based identity management, one of the purposes of which is to deter citizens of the Global South from entering the EU (Leese et al., 2021; Tazzioli, 2019). Regardless of the evolution of the EU border regime and its obsession with coding the *idem*, recalling Couze Venn (2005: 293, n3) identity

...is not the sameness of a permanent, continuous, immutable, fixed entity; it is instead the mode of relating to being that can be characterized as selfhood. Self is not a fact or an event [*nor data, for that matter – author*], it is not reducible to the facticity of things-in-themselves (...). The identity of a person, or a group, or a people, takes the form of stories told; it is fundamentally relational.

If identity is considered as relational as power has been since Foucault’s theorization, then its simplifications are equally open to contestation. The inherent link between *idem* and *ipse*, that is, the irreducibility of identity, also sheds light on practices of identity management beyond the technical emphasis of recent research on data injustices associated with migration and border control technologies (Aradau and Perret, 2022; Grüneberg et al., 2020; Pelizza, 2020; Pelizza, 2021; Schoemaker et al., 2021; Tazzioli, 2025), and beyond the AoM scholarship that examines how policies and technologies are appropriated by illegalized migrants (Galis et al., 2022; Grüneberg et al., 2020; Lewkowicz, 2023; Safouane, 2018; Scheel, 2019).

While the privilege of managing populations and identities is typically attributed to states, financial institutions, and other actors, “identity management” can also refer to individual agency, irrespective of legality or illegality. Passports and names can be legally managed by individuals. People holding multiple citizenships may strategically use their passports to signal belonging to one ethnic group rather than another (Pogonyi, 2018). Not citing Ricoeur, but echoing his interest in the *ipse*, Amit and Dolberg (2023: 2) analyzed how perceived otherness may prompt one to change one’s name, arguing that “identities are formed through social interactions” and “the image of an individual is reflected in others’ reactions to him or her, that is, in his or her perceived identity.” Indeed, the most important component of identity—demonstrating the incompleteness of the *idem* without the *ipse*—is perhaps one’s personal name. Recalling Avishai Margalit (2004: 22–23), “one’s name is not just a convenient tool for preserving one’s memory but is taken as intimately related to one’s essence. If the name survives, the essence somehow survives as well.” Following this logic, if identification disregards the *ipse*, while *idem* components, such as personal data, biometrics, or genetic traits, are used to the detriment of the individual, whether recorded accurately or erroneously, the essence of identity is also transformed, if not entirely lost.

Passing and identity forgery in historical terms

Passing with an assumed identity originally referred to “an attempt made by Jews to disguise their Jewish identity by adopting a non-Jewish identity...by hiding in plain sight or in open hiding as a mechanism of evasion and survival” (Green, 2022: 113) in cases when escape was impossible. Experiences of passing have been difficult to document, even within the otherwise extensive Holocaust studies, owing to the multiplicity of European languages, the scatteredness and secrecy of such practices (Green, 2022: 113, fn9; JFR n.y.; Yad Vashem, 2024), and the trauma—which resists verbal representation—embedded in passing and rescue (Fogelman, 1994). While passing with an assumed identity may have secured the survival of Jews in scattered locations in Europe (Fogelman, 1994; Green, 2022; Melchior, 2005; Sanderson, 2018), their escape to and entry in overseas locations and Mandate Palestine was deemed illegal in the 1940s (Ofer, 1990; Patek, 2012). To unpack the tenets of digital passing in the following section, it is first necessary to summarize how passing was historically possible, how it can be interpreted, and why insights from Holocaust studies remain relevant in contemporary contexts.

Practices of passing. Studies of passing using an assumed identity have traditionally focused on practices

situated within specific local milieus—urban, suburban, and rural environments across diverse landscapes in Europe (Green, 2022: 117). Since mobility was essential, individuals attempting to pass had to resemble Aryans (Melchior, 2005: 164). This entailed a “hierarchy of desirability” from the perspective of rescuers too, who may have also assessed biological attributes before deciding to rescue someone (Fogelman, 1994: 139).¹

[A]t the top [of the ranking] – that is, most preferred – were Jewish women who could pass for Aryans and who, in addition, had false identification papers. The most difficult to place were males who ‘looked Jewish’...girls were more desirable than boys, whose circumcised penises gave them away as Jewish. Preverbal youngsters and adolescents were easier to hide than four-to-ten-year-old children, whose unpredictability gave rescuers pause.

While passing encompassed a diverse set of practices and procedures (Green, 2022: 114–115), forged or reclassified documents—such as birth certificates, travel papers, identity cards, and transit visas bearing valid or unauthorized stamps and signatures supplied by diplomats and officers (Raoul Wallenberg, Carl Lutz, Hans Calmeyer, others) or just nameless forgers—were necessary but not sufficient components. Rescue often depended on the alignment between documents representing the *idem* dimension, narratives sustaining a fabricated *ipse* identity, and the spatial conditions individuals had to navigate (Fogelman, 1994; Green, 2022; JFR, n.y.; Melchior, 2005).

Passing for resistance or survival? Until about the 1980s, the scholarly portrayal of Holocaust survivor did not include those that were passing as non-Jews or hiding (Fogelman, 1994: 16). Mainstream interpretations of passing with assumed identities have largely been confined to narratives of political resistance and Gentile-facilitated rescue within Holocaust studies (Green, 2022: 112). This approach framed passing as a practice imbued with political agency, serving the purposes of disobedience. However, passing as a response to persecution can also be understood as driven by a simpler motive—pure survival (Green, 2022: 124). This interpretation reflects the understanding that “the ability to cope with the existential dread inherent to their situation of life ‘on the move’ was required for successful passing, that is, survival” (Green, 2022: 115, 117–118). Hence, Green (2022: 115) argued for disavowing moralizing and politicized frameworks to help restore victims’ power and agency by showing that passing, even during the Holocaust, was often an “agential practice” that deserves acknowledgment, even when it did not serve the political goal of resistance.

The contemporary relevance of the above. To avoid the debate over whether the Holocaust’s uniqueness renders any comparison impossible, it is more productive to

concentrate on individual experiences rather than structural similarities or differences between the Holocaust and contemporary mass atrocities.² Individuals who were hiding with or without assumed identities did not do so primarily to evade the Holocaust and Porajmos; its full scope became widely understood *ex post*.³ Rather, treated as risks to public order and national security (Arendt, 2004: 1–155; 341–384), they sought to escape classification (the yellow star), the deprivation of rights and citizenship, persecution, random shooting and mass graves, ghettoization, deportation, transport in sealed freight wagons (cattle cars), the blue tattoo, and ultimately the threat of a violent death, or, when escape was impossible, at least to save their children’s lives (Fogelman, 1994: 21–38; Lewy, 2000).

By assuming Aryan identities, Jews and Roma have acted in ways broadly comparable to both their historical predecessors (Mays, 2020) and contemporary migrants who, under conditions of illegality, seek to escape inhumane circumstances. Although contemporary illegal(ized) migrants cannot legally be profiled based on race and ethnicity nor deprived of their human rights—rights that international law guarantees irrespective of citizenship, at least in theory—their legal (non-)status, whether as non-citizens or stateless persons, often obstructs not only lawful mobility but also the possibility of survival. The inhumane conditions that characterize territories that oscillate between war and conflict as well as state-run detention centers and refugee camps in the Global South, and border regions of the Global North from Australia to the Mediterranean (Barnes, 2022; Peterie, 2024; Van Reisen et al., 2023) are by no means safer or more humane than the ghettos and concentration camps were during the Holocaust.⁴ This condition places millions at risk, both within their countries of origin and in the other regions where they seek refuge, but encounter entry denial, if they cannot “document” persecution. At the same time neither yellow stars, nor blue tattoos are required for identification. While digital and biometric technologies can reveal or verify the *idem* components of one’s individual identity (Scheel, 2024b: 2292) and even predict the origins of unidentified people by visualizing body types based on DNA samples (Kaufmann and Vestad, 2023), successful rescue and survival often depended on preserving the anonymity of both the rescued and the rescuer in the 1940s (Fogelman, 1994: 15).

To the extent that the Holocaust and Porajmos were designed to annihilate the very concept of “human beings” by eradicating not only life but also human dignity (Arendt, 1994, 2004), such experiences are comparable to the contemporary ones of “unwanted” people. Escaping precarious situations today is not necessarily easier than they were in the 1930s and 1940s; rather it is qualitatively different. Ironically, while ghettos were intended as temporary spaces preceding Hitler’s final solution, contemporary “undesired people” are allowed to navigate prolonged exposure to abuse and violence due to conflicts in their country of

origin, exclusionary migration regimes (Besteman, 2020), and labyrinths of “technosecurity” (Skinner, 2020), often for years. They are kept alive but deliberately excluded from privileged spaces, effectively being given the “opportunity” to embody the traps inherent in Agamben’s interpretation of “bare life”—humans-as-animals without political freedom—whether through the sewing of their lips (Owens, 2010) or digital passing.

From identity fraud to digital passing

Recalling Jenny Edkins (2013: 13), persons and identities are constituted through the real or imagined existence of social order. This social order includes international human rights law. Recalling General Comment No. 36 (CCPR/C/GC/36) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the meaning of the right to life, Article 6 defines the right to life in the following way (UN HRC, 2019: 1):

(2) The right to life is the supreme right from which no derogation is permitted, even in situations of armed conflict and other public emergencies that threaten the life of the nation ... (3) The right to life is a right that should not be interpreted narrowly. It concerns the entitlement of individuals to be free from acts and omissions that are intended or may be expected to cause their unnatural or premature death, as well as to enjoy a life with dignity.

While scholars may envision such order and advocate for data justice in the context of legal identities and identification (Martin and Taylor, 2021; Masiero, 2024), survival instinct knows no legal basis. Hence, given the compelling need to escape and survive, digital passing can be conceptualized as a practice aimed at navigating technosecurity systems composed of biometric surveillance and identification technologies, as well as the mess (errors, gaps, and traces) embedded in databases, and also at avoiding border controls or negotiating human interactions at physical borders, police checkpoints, or the endpoints of humanitarian supply chains. Selfhood (narratives and imagination) is mobilized for the purpose of imitating sameness in order to survive when the original legal identity—reduced to its *idem* dimension through the recording and coding of personal, biometric, or genetic data—fails to facilitate lawful crossing, escape, or access to food and shelter, thereby potentially resulting in unnatural or premature death or violations of human dignity.

Similar to passing with an assumed identity during the Holocaust, digital passing may, albeit temporarily, facilitate survival by shielding individuals from the consequences of (mis)identification and recognition based solely on the *idem* dimension of identity. Given that identity fraud reflects state-centric perspectives, the notion of digital passing offers a conceptual lens for describing “corrective mechanisms” from the standpoint of unwanted or persecuted

individuals who do not enjoy human rights protection in practice.

States and international organizations justify biometric systems partly on the assumption that people who cannot move from A to B legally due to their citizenship intend to cheat (Jain et al., 2011; Marcel et al., 2014; Scheel, 2024b: 2292). Due to the diversity of contexts, motives, and biometric fraud practices, digital passing is far less straightforward than analog passing was during the Holocaust. As illustrated by the term digital trace, the complete profiles of migrants who encounter authorities at various physical locations are not even always recorded (Tazzioli, 2025: 2). Similarly to unknown victims or perpetrators at an ordinary crime scene (Casey and Jaquet-Chiffelle, 2019), asylum-seekers or illegal(ized) migrants often leave only *idem* fragments—i.e. partially or inadequately recorded data, perhaps multiple(d) “identities” dispersed across partially interoperable national and inter-governmental (EU) databases—over which no one has full control. While passers in the 1940s underwent the dual process of “becoming” and “unbecoming” because of assuming identities (Green, 2022: 118), digital identification systems often generate scattered digital subjectivities instead of, or in addition to, data doubles as “discrete and intelligible objects of knowledge” (Tazzioli, 2022, 2025). Hence, the respective human individuals not only “feel disintegrated,” but also “unable to give an account of themselves” which only increases their vulnerability and dependence in the oftentimes overlapping context of aid and migration (Tazzioli, 2021). As they personally bear the consequences of “scattered subjectivities” (Scheel, 2024b: 2292; Tazzioli, 2025: 4–6), motivations and strategies are also more diverse and elusive than they were during the Holocaust.

Motivations explaining digital passing: States manipulating the idem while recording data

Digital passing can be understood not only as a response to the injustices at the nexus of migration laws—visa and access denials based on citizenship—and the precarious conditions that threaten human life and dignity, but also, recalling Scheel (2019: 215), *as a consequence of* the datafication of migration management. The alterity of non-EU citizens has long been processed for purposes of asymmetric legibility. It denotes practices that reshape certain dimensions of identity when foreign individuals’ digitalized profiles are enrolled in databases by border control authorities or police (Pelizza, 2020, 2021; Tazzioli, 2025). Citing Annalisa Pelizza’s (2021: 500) observations, datafication of the *idem* is not without consequences:

The applicant is being literally translated as his name changes from Arabic to Latin characters, the interpreter attunes

[attributes] his North-African Arabic to the Syrian pronunciation ... [The applicant] knows that no accurate representation of his name is possible, as what is at stake is not reflecting a pre-existent identity, but performing a new one.

(Un)like human (mis)identification, digital (mis)identification may not only produce a sense of identity loss but also enable or motivate identity fraud. If a sign (personal data) replaces and represents “another thing in its absence [the human individual and its identity], nothing prevents this sign from substituting and replacing a different thing – whether it exists or not” (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2019: 8). As data is recorded in multiple, increasingly interoperable EU databases by humans, digital doubles, such as “[p]asports, photos, and even biometric data are under suspicion of being ‘fake’” or erroneous (Aradau and Perret, 2022: 415). In other words, the (erroneously) recorded data or data traces might be used to exclude multiple persons, as such data may readily become part of what Keren Weitzberg (2020a) termed an “administrative lie” (in recalling the complex story of a refugee of Somali origin, born in Kenya, but “disowned” by the country where he was raised, who was only able to obtain asylum in Sweden by assuming Somali nationality). While migrants are often held responsible for the mess of errors and falsifications that pervade database management (Aradau and Perret, 2022), authorities may also play dirty by employing “practices that operate at the margins of, or even cross, the boundaries of what is legally permissible” (Scheel, 2024a: 464), for example, by obtaining information from asylum-seekers mobile devices (Scheel, 2024b) or recording information on age which does not correspond to reality (Tazzioli, 2025: 5).

Practices of digital passing

Noting the presence of “embarrassing and ambivalent conduct” that characterizes interactions at borders (Lewkowicz, 2023: 252; Scheel, 2019: 157–208) and officer discretion even within the Schengen-zone (Woude, 2025), practices of digital passing range from actively managing social media profiles (Schoemaker et al., 2021: 27) to experimenting with counterfeit European ID cards (Lewkowicz, 2023). As shown in Table 1, they also include biometric obfuscation, that is, a strategy for evading identification, most commonly by altering physical appearance or fingerprints to conceal identity (Kaur et al., 2023). Denoting a “deliberate attempt to create an error in a biometric system, either a false match or a false nonmatch,” spoofing occurs when “a person tries to masquerade as a valid user by presenting this user’s counterfeit biometric trait to the [face-recognition or fingerprint] sensor” (Marcel et al., 2014: 5). To avoid accurate enrollment in increasingly interoperable border control databases in the EU, people either navigate different phases of the identification procedure by providing fragments of their fingerprints (Metcalfe,

2021) or physically alter them (Glouftsios and Casaglia, 2022: 576).

If the function of the narratives and fake documents was to convince SS and police officers that one was not Jewish during the Holocaust, imagination in the digital era is also directed toward collecting information on identification systems designed to prevent access or entry (Makrygianni and Galis, 2022). Martina Tazzioli (2024) used the term “counter-mapping” to denote the systematic exploration of practices at sites of border control. For example, when exclusion can be assumed based on information that is gathered, individuals may attempt to minimize this risk by selecting travel routes where authorities are less prepared or where the equipment necessary for identification is unavailable. The experiences of a Hungarian-speaking mayor of a Slovakian village (Presinszky, 2023) support this claim:

Then they [the Slovakian police] even *write down* the data, the names. That’s absolutely ridiculous. Everybody’s birthday is on 1 January, only the year changes: 2007, 2004, 2005. Once, out of 179 [migrants of Global South origin without documents facilitating legal movement], thirty-five were named Ahmad, and forty were named Ali [*emphasis added by the author*].

The village in question is not a major border entry point to the EU, but a minor former crossing point between Slovakia and Hungary that is used primarily by local residents. Hence, this case exemplifies how so-called “tricksters”—individuals who cannot easily pass as white Europeans and therefore cannot forge all the attributes of their *idem* identity—attempted to navigate routes and mobilize the narrative (*ipse*) identity, hoping unprepared authorities would record them under fake names (or with traces), perhaps as minors. Elsewhere, adults may fabricate other *ipse* identity attributes - attributes that likely facilitate entry - for example, to appear as “a Nigerian gay man ... persecuted by Boko Haram” (Pelizza, 2020: 278) being aware of the legal protection (extended to LMBTQ-minorities) and the technically feasible, albeit time-consuming verification of biological age (which, unlike narrated persecution, may lead to entry denial). These examples illustrate the validity of Venn’s above-cited reflection on Riceour: it is the relational nature of narrative (*ipse*) identity that responds to the features of identification technologies that require legal-administrative justifications to permit entry. Law protecting minors or persecuted minorities constitutes an opportunity to pass from the individual’s perspective.

Not only were Jews, Roma, and their rescuers during the Holocaust aware of the dangers posed by physical appearance, but contemporary migrant experiences likewise confirm the validity of “passing” experiences offered by critical race studies (Ahmad, 2015; Mullen, 1994).⁵ As ethnographic studies demonstrate, not only is “an Arab man alone with a backpack” suspicious, but darker skin

Table 1. A typology of identity fraud and digital passing.

Identity fraud	Passing during the Holocaust	Main forms of digital passing	Potential examples from selected works
Based on Koops et al. (2009: 6–8); Baechler (2020); Smith et al. (2018); Kaur et al. (2023), others	Fogelman (1994); Melchior (2005); Sanderson (2018); Green (2022: 113, fn9; 118–120); Yad Vassem (2024)	Attributes	
Identity change	Takeover, usurpation: adopting an existing person's identity <i>without consent</i> Delegation: using the existing identity of another individual <i>with consent</i> Exchange: same as above, but <i>mutually</i> Creation: fabricating an identity not linked to an existing individual	Using a real person's personal data (name, citizenship) or other real or fake documents (payslips, etc), but not biometric credentials; biometric spoofing Same as above, with the consent of the given person or their relatives	Scheel (2019: 143–148); Lewkowicz (2023)
Identity obstruction	Identity creation: forging or counterfeiting baptismal letters, travel documents, their content, signatures, or stamps Identity loss: destroying documents proving Jewish origin	Obtaining fake documents, ID cards, or passports whose photo or other personal data resembles that of a real but non-existent person; potentially, the information coded in the biometric chip can also be manipulated Identity “stripping” (original (biometric) ID, passports destroyed, hidden, or thrown away by the individual) and manipulating encounters with authorities at border crossings	Scheel (2019: 143–148); Lewkowicz (2023); Weitzberg (2020a)
Identification obstruction	Identity performance: manipulating physical appearance	Biometric obfuscation (mutilating fingerprints) Obfuscation by manipulating the process of identification: getting only traces of personal data (names, fingerprints) recorded in databases Active management of social media profiles or using fake profiles Counter-mapping or appropriating “technosecurity” tools	Ellermann (2010); Kuster and Tsianos (2022: 28–34); Ukrainian (Roma) citizens hiding their Hungarian passports Scheel (2019: 216); Glouftsiou and Casaglia (2022: 575–576) Metcalfe (2021)
Errors and traces in digital records			Schoemaker et al. (2021: 27)
Other			Makrygianni and Galis (2022); Tazzioli (2024); Illiterate Ukrainian Roma sharing audio/ files with information on movement and access opportunities

also poses a challenge even to rescuers with or without vested interests (Lewkowicz, 2023: 261):

Maher thinks that if his hair were brighter, he would have received more offers from smugglers. Smugglers prefer refugees with brown hair because they succeed [in navigating borders] fast, and the smuggler loses less money, he says. Many refugees believed that Syrians from particular areas had a higher chance of passing as Southern Europeans than African migrants or Arabs from other areas, like Iraq or Yemen.

Not only skin color but mother tongue can also lead to harmful categorization, hence exclusion, as illustrated by the experiences of the Roma population of Ukraine. Recalling that until December 2024, Ukraine did not recognize dual citizenship, Ukrainian Roma often left Ukraine using their Ukrainian passport (hiding their Hungarian passport, if they had one). Yet, in spring 2022, approximately 5000 Roma individuals were reportedly denied protection associated with the EU TPM by the Czech government, which mistakenly assumed they held Hungarian citizenship and were therefore ineligible for such protection (Ryšavý, 2022). Other Roma families arriving at the Hungarian border presented only non-biometric documents (sometimes birth certificates only) for various reasons. Only if they used Ukrainian documents did Hungarian border control officers grant them such entry permits that provided access to accommodation, three meals a day, free transportation. Although the complicated landscape (UNHCR, 2025) required functional, legal and digital literacy to navigate, the Roma population employed the features of smartphones to share results of their counter-mapping by using their (Romani) native language:

The Transcarpathian Roma population is mostly illiterate, but their imagination is incredible. Instead of texting and reading, they communicate by audio and video files to share the[ir] experiences on where to cross, what to say, and how to approach various authorities in the EU.⁶

As observed by a local employee of a Hungarian aid organization assisting Ukrainians near the border, these families have “navigated among reception centers from Hungary to Sweden to secure food, accommodation, and other basic entitlements” over the past 4 years, often returning to Ukraine in the absence of better alternatives.⁷ Other organizations that supported migrants noted that the Hungarian Orban-government’s decision (August 2024) to modify eligibility conditions was likely motivated by its reluctance “to keep on feeding” this segment of Ukrainian forced migrants.⁸

Substantiating digital passing

The term “assumed identities” provides a useful starting point for examining the similarities and differences between identity practices during the 1940s and forms of digital passing. The term “assumed” was chosen by Holocaust scholars to avoid connotations with labels such as “fraud,” “fake,” or “forgery,” which imply criminality and, by extension, presuppose the legitimacy of state bureaucracies and legislative frameworks. Citing Gunnar Paulsson’s work on the Jews hiding in Warsaw, even the term “evasion”—used also in the AoM scholarship (Scheel, 2019: 189–191)—has derogatory connotations (Paulsson, 2002: 246, also Green, 2022: 123):

[W]e are not pleased to be accused of evasiveness: evasion seems dishonourable and makes of cowardice ... [o]ur fixation with honour has led not only to the neglect of evasion because it sounds dishonourable, but to lumping everything that we do consider honourable under the catch-all...category of resistance.

However, Jews as well as Gypsies who survived with assumed identities, and those who provided them with fraudulent documents, disregarded the legitimacy of the given regimes and ignored the legal/illegal, lawful/unlawful distinctions for mere survival (Fogelman, 1994). Such considerations resonate well with contemporary practices. As observed by Lewkowicz (2023: 263), the primary principle through which digital passers differentiate between “papers” is “not legality or authenticity but rather [the] efficacy” of ID cards and photos available in smugglers’ ID archives.

Political resistance. The interpretation “passing as resistance” reminds us of concepts that are alternatives to “identity fraud.” What is considered “hacking” or “conversion” in surveillance studies (Kaufmann, 2024: 69–86) conceptually overlaps with “appropriation” in the AoM-literature due to shared traits, such as repurposing, imagination, a diversity of practices and identity work (Franck and Vigneswaran, 2021; Scheel, 2019: 90–96). Although their domains are different, conversion and appropriation share certain “inherently political quality due to moments of self-authorization” (Kaufmann, 2024: 71–72; Scheel, 2019: 96). As states increasingly criminalize migration, migrants of Global South origin are often portrayed as political heroes who resist, subvert, or hack migration control (Ellermann, 2010; Franck and Vigneswaran, 2021), freedom fighters (Hidalgo, 2019), or agents of border-politics (Scheel, 2019). While the purpose of resistance in the context of countersurveillance is to challenge the system by evading its grasp, not to eliminate it (Kaufmann, 2024: 69–86; Lebovic, 2015: 865–866), the scholarship that explores the agency of migrants tend to attribute political dimension to fakes (Aradau and Perret, 2022; Scheel, 2019:

136–156 and 189–195; Tazzioli, 2022). Thus, identity forgery somehow becomes a heroic act contesting administrative-political power in an era that has been described as “techno-racist” (Molnar, 2023).

Survival and dignity. However, a “preoccupation with what is honourable has led to ... a counterproductive censorship” even in Holocaust scholarship by silencing a more complex assessment of passing and preventing a comprehensive exploration of the “myriad experiences of survival and victimization” (Green, 2022: 123). Indeed, the primary function of passing was survival: convincing Nazi authorities that one was not Jewish during the Holocaust. Imagination in the digital era is often directed toward exploring the traps and opportunities embedded in digitalized identity management systems. Such imagination, however, is not simply about the creative practices ensuring movement, access, escape, or survival, but it also reveals the overlapping of *ipse* and *idem* and the paradoxes inherent to personal identity⁹ (Ricoeur, 1992: 122–139). Lessons from the 1940s (Arendt, 1943: 112) demonstrate the potential consequences of ignoring both integrity and inherent paradoxes:

After the murder of the moral person and the annihilation of the juridical person [*identified by the idem*], the destruction of individuality [*individual identity*] is almost always successful... For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources [*narrative skills, creativity, imagination*], something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events ... What totalitarian ideologies [*profit-motivated technologization/datafication included*] aim at is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionising transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself.

The cost of this transformation, labeled data colonialism, is borne by all humans (Couldry and Mejias, 2019) but disproportionately by non-privileged individuals, as demonstrated by studies mapping the impact of intertwined racism and digitalization (Couldry and Mejias, 2023; Weitzberg, 2020b). It is no surprise that fake photo IDs that demonstrate EU citizenship serve as “status symbols” for the migrants who hold them illegally in Greece (Lewkowicz, 2023: 257), for digital passing increases their room for maneuver and chance of survival. Interpreting migrants’ experiences in contemporary Germany, Safouane, Jüenemann, and Göttsche (in Borrelli et al., 2021: 1145) also warned that “articulations of [contemporary] migrant agency cannot always be reduced to the expression of an emancipatory agenda and resistance against power.” In fact, it is precisely the status of irregular migrants that makes it difficult for them to mobilize politically (Ambrosini and Hajer, 2023: 137). As illustrated by the passing practices of the Ukrainian Roma cited above, their prime motive was simply staying alive, literally from day

to day, by sharing information on how to secure access to food and shelter orally, in the form of audio and video files.

To mitigate vulnerability, contemporary migrants themselves forge “sameness” not only by “accepting and reproducing norms, labels, and discourses that are suspicious towards difference” (Borrelli et al., 2022: 1146), but also through practices of digital passing. Hence, while scholars have criticized the irony implied in official interpretations that “fakes appear to endow asylum seekers with excessive knowledge and power” (Aradau and Perret, 2022: 420), reference to such “knowledge and power” may signify something beyond a peculiar sense of bureaucratic humor, migrants’ malicious intent, or their intention to resist in political terms. As observed by Lewkowicz (2023: 263), migrants may forge identities not so much in order to create “lasting impersonations,” but rather to impersonate “an ideal type or habitus: the habitus of the free-moving European.” Their primary purpose is not necessarily *political* resistance but escaping abuse and violence associated with illegality¹⁰ (Glouftsiou and Casaglia, 2022: 572–574). By manipulating the *idem* or mobilizing the *ipse* dimensions, they reclaim some freedom (Glouftsiou and Casaglia, 2022: 577) and maximize the “moments of uncontrollability” (Metcalf, 2021) needed to stay alive.

When the purpose of the “data double” is not to include vulnerable (foreign) others, but to enable powerful actors—border control authorities, non-profit and for-profit organizations—to make judgements about eligibility (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000: 611–614 cited by Scheel, 2019: 63), then digital passing is a natural response that promises an escape from precarious situations and the privilege of survival. As Arendt put it (1943: 118), “the less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, so hide the facts and [...] play roles.” While this role-playing may be the only way to correct *idem*-based identifications, history teaches that it is a survival instinct that leads individuals to choose dangerous, risky, and illegal paths as an alternative to hopelessness, violence, or biological death (Fogelman, 1994; Green, 2022; Lewy, 2000; Mays, 2020; Melchior, 2005; Sanderson, 2018). This instinct—choosing *life over identity*—was powerful enough to compel individuals to conceal their Jewish origin even after the war, even from their spouses and children, and even on the Western side of the Iron Curtain (Johansson and Mattsson, 2024). So, paraphrasing Aradau and Perret (2022: 419), when migrants who have been rendered undesired, hence illegal in diverse locations, engage in acts of digital passing, they do so because *they indeed know too much* of the precarious boundaries separating life from death—boundaries that authorities and officials either lack understanding of or deliberately choose to ignore.

Playing a role, however, requires effort, as demonstrated by Umberto Eco’s work on falsification (Eco and Weaver, 1998) and the “effort required to build a lie” is always greater than “the effort needed to tell plain truth”

(Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2019: 8). The fact that people try to maximize their chances by digital passing demonstrates that they are willing to pay the cost of redressing lies in “believable clothing, work[ing] hard to provide evidence for [such] lie[s] and present[ing them in] a convinc[ing] manner” (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2019: 9). Only such lies can save lives or provide (the illusion of) dignity when people are deprived of legal identity, witness their asylum applications stalled, or when authentic identities—the very *integrity of ipse and idem*—hinder movement or access. Recalling Arendt (1943: 119):

[T]hose that tried to get along *without* all these tricks and jokes of adjustment and assimilation have paid a much higher price than they could afford: they jeopardized the few chances even outlaws are given in a topsy-turvy world.

Without narrative identity (*ipse*, selfhood), a person cannot understand themselves as a person or be capable of different accomplishments (Pettersson, 2025: 211). Hence—and here somehow echoing Arendt’s message formulated in her *We Refugees* (Arendt, 1994)—digital passing may also “allow for the smuggling of truths [regarding the *ipse*] into administrative lies” coded in databases (Weitzberg, 2020a). It expresses one’s will to live in response to an identity administered solely by codable *idem* elements. Digital passing is also a way of preventing the “[q]uantified self ... [from being] emptie[d...] of any and all meaning” (Han, 2017, 60). After all, when the self “gets broken down into [personal, biometric, genetic] data” and decisions are made by ignoring subjectivities and narratives, “no sense remains” (Han, 2017: 60). If the individual who owns the body cannot remain anonymous, while is “seen as unnecessary and, even more importantly, insufficient for identification” (Franko, 2006: 156) - somehow resembling pets, animals with ID-papers, that might threaten biosecurity in the European Union (Sandvik, 2023) — digital passing may also represent the victory of the human mind over increasingly automated biometric control and their advocates. (Re)alignment of the *ipse* and the *idem* is needed for staying alive.

Conclusion

Imre Kertész was able to narrate young György Köves’ experiences because he himself had lived through the experiences of Budapest, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald. He survived both by “fate” and “freedom”—by faking his date of birth and occupation so he was registered as older than his actual age¹¹—which enabled him to reflect on the “idiotic bitterness” of innocence and victimhood in hindsight.

Recalling the origins of biometric systems, Lebovic (2015: 845, 847) traced their origins to the philosophy of life and death known as “Nazi biopolitics.” Drawing on


historical lessons and Ricoeur’s identity components, this article conceptualized digital passing as a set of practices that enable individuals to take responsibility for their lives; an alternative to accepting the incompleteness encoded in data doubles or digital traces. When states abdicate their human rights obligations, when people are denied the chance to narrate their own stories, and when identification technologies serve selection, ordering, and exclusionary purposes, the space for individual maneuvering shrinks to the minimum. Indeed, states, in cooperation with private actors, not only surveil, penalize, or exclude, but also, by reducing human identity to its *idem* elements (biometric data), sacrifice the *ipse*—narratives, imagination, and fantasy which have historically ensured survival—on the altar of (equally imagined) security.

Although Green (2022: 111) called for revisiting passing experiences only within Holocaust studies, broadening the notion of passing beyond its political role (resistance) can also inform contemporary thinking about the “trickster narrative” in other disciplines. Apparently, “neurotic states” can handle the truth carried as burdens by vulnerable individuals only by implementing apartheid-like solutions (Besteman, 2020). Hence, when complicated life stories—those that make up selfhood, the *ipse* dimension of identity—remain unheard or irrelevant, individuals are compelled to manipulate what is recorded and appreciated by those in power. Stories of Jewish and Roma survivors confirm that without affirmative acts, survival is impossible in cases when identification, or its lack, leads to exclusion or persecution. Similarly, digital passing is simply a pragmatic means by which individuals can escape the diverse forms of abuse and violence, the chance of premature death, they encounter in intertwined physical and digital spaces.

Acknowledgements

This paper was inspired both by literary experiences and personal encounters. During the writing process, I received precious feedback from members of Security and Technology Research Group at Peace Research Institute Oslo and the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law (IKRS, University of Oslo). Special thanks to Katja Franko, Özlem Gürakar Skribeland, Helene O. I. Gundhus and Mareile Kaufmann at IKRS and Hana Green at Zucker/Goldberg Center for Holocaust Studies at the College of Charleston for their encouragement provided in the form of comments on the developing manuscript. I also owe thanks to my interviewees, the editors of *Big Data & Society* for their trust, for the three anonymous reviewers’ exceptional engagement, to my colleague, Simon Milton for language editing as well as to my home institute (Corvinus University of Budapest) for covering the costs associated with publication. The responsibility for any remaining error is mine.

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Ethical considerations and approval

Neither confidential, nor sensitive data was collected. The interviewees were provided information on the research, and I obtained their (verbal or written) consent following the written ethics approval issued by the Research Ethics Committee (Office of the Vice Rector, Corvinus University of Budapest, KRH/202/2024). One interviewee provided her consent orally, and two of them by signing a form.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research was partially funded by the Bolyai Research Scholarship (2024–2027, provided by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, grant ID: BO/00604/24) which explores how digital technology affects the work of aid organizations operating in Hungary.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. See also the documentary based on Fogelman (1994), *The Ordinary Thing* (directed by Nick Davis, 2025).
2. There is no consensus around the nature (uniqueness) of Holocaust among genocide scholars.
3. Fogelman (1994: 35) cited the Dutch historian, Louis de Jong: “the Holocaust, when it took place, was beyond ... the comprehension of almost all people living at the time, Jews included.” World War II (1939–1945) claimed about 60 million lives. In total, six million Jewish victims were murdered by the German regime and its allies in “killing centres” (2.7m), mass shootings (2m), in ghettos and labor camps (0.8–1m), and through other acts of violence (0.25m), sources: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution> and <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-losses-during-the-holocaust-by-country>.
4. For evidence on the inhuman conditions resulting from violence committed by states and corporations, see, among others, the collections of Forensic Architecture, <https://forensic-architecture.org/> and Border Forensics, <https://www.borderforensics.org/>.
5. Scholars of critical race studies have also contemplated “whiteness” as a value or capital, the counterfeit (fake) version of which is “blackness” (Mullen, 1994). Thus, attempts to pass as white easily become “fraudulent,” a means of obtaining benefits one “should not” be eligible for as a non-white individual according to institutional arrangements (Ahmad, 2015).
6. Follow-up discussion with a (former) official at the regional office of IOM, Budapest, 13 May 2025.

7. Phone interview with a local employee of a Hungarian faith-based organization, phone interview with a local employee, Budapest/Beregsurany, 6 April 2025, and a follow-up field visit at the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, Beregsurany, 30 June, 2025.
8. Interview with a longstanding volunteer and employee of a Hungarian NGO, Budapest, 8 October 2024.
9. Recalling Riceour (1992: 129): “One has only to compare two self-portraits of Rembrandt—it is not the sameness of my body that constitutes its selfhood, but its belonging to someone capable of designating himself or herself as the one whose body this is.”
10. See also the non-fiction feature film *To a Land Unknown* (2024, directed by Mahdi Fleifel).
11. Quoting here from his Nobel lecture (2002): “One day I received a large brown envelope in the mail. It was sent to me by ... the director of the Buchenwald Memorial Center. ... The envelope contained a copy of the original daily report on the camp’s prisoners for February 18, 1945. In the ... ‘Decrement’ column, I learned about the death of Prisoner #64,921 – Imre Kertész, factory worker, born in 1927. The two false data: the year of my birth and my occupation were entered in the official registry when I was brought to Buchenwald. I had made myself two years older so I wouldn’t be classified as a child and had said worker rather than student to appear more useful to them. In short, I died once, so I could live. Perhaps that is my real story,” the full speech is available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2002/kerteszl/lecture/>.

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