

ABSTRACT

Shape-shifting: Negotiating Identities through Performance in the Passing Novel

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The formation of an identity, particularly a racial identity, is governed by a combination of self-perception and belonging within a community. The racially ambiguous body lends itself to the assumption of a multiplicity of identities and plays a critical role in the examination of a variety of perspectives on “race.” Passing in its traditional sense emerged in the United States of America as a transgressive practice, which members of a subjugated community utilized to resist organized systems of prejudice and racism, and served to disrupt deeply entrenched misconceptions about “race.” It is a performative act of reiterating archetypal behaviours associated with a particular racial community.

This thesis is an interrogation of how “race” is constructed in binaries of superior and inferior; freedom and oppression; White and ‘Coloured.’ Through an examination of passing novels I challenge so-called scientific theories about “race”, redefining them through social and cultural lenses. I hypothesize a reading of “race” as a repetition of acts toward a creation of identity in the passing novel.

It is hoped that casting “race” as a reified identity created through repeated performances will contribute to currently existing scholarship on performativity, race, and identity. It is the continuation of a conversation about self-definition and urgings toward embracing emerging ideas of ‘trans-racialism.’

Keywords: Laveta Tabetia Anna-Kay Mead: race: identity: passing and performance.