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RACIAL PASSING IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LITERATURE:
COMPLICATING COLOR IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE NOVEL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: Racial Passing in Twenty-First Century Literature: Complicating Color in the African-American Fin-de-Siècle Novel

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This dissertation focuses on how racial passing can be a critical strategy for defining and validating a nuanced conceptualization of blackness in twenty-first century African-American Literature. Specifically in the works of Sapphire, Danzy Senna, and Colson Whitehead, the historical moment of passing yet endures into the future. Scholars have thoroughly analyzed racial passing in African American literature according to a standard definition of narratives written primarily in the early twentieth-century. These texts are steeped in sentimentality and tragedy about the abandonment of the black body and social identity. However, the popularity of post-racial discourse at the turn of the twenty-first century marks a shift in racial passing as a millennial concept, creating a space for the expansion of what constitutes a passing narrative. These millennial narratives address and parallel the changing social-political American racial climate.

This research is an attempt to trace the shifts of the racial passing construct that allow for questions of representation, resistance, agency, and power relative to race and race relations in an ever increasingly, but arguably, post-racial society. Furthermore, passing narratives at the turn of the century critique the importance of maintaining fixed racial identities in order to empower the individual through redefining, reconnecting, and reclaiming one's blackness.

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I leave you with this: I strive to be the woman that if my five years-old self were to meet me would say, "I want to be like her when I grow up!" That little girl would be amazed at the woman I have become.