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Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*: The Neo Passing Novel between Heritage and Reinvention.

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Introduction

The Passing novel is an American literary tradition, dealing with racial issues, racial identity and racial fluidity. This literary motif appeared in reaction to the numerous cases of passing, which occurred in the United States of America since the eighteenth century, when African people escaped slavery to survive. Passing is the act of crossing any line, separating social groups or races. History has revealed several cases of passing. In his book *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, Werner Sollors quotes the American sociologist Everett Stonequist:

> A great variety of cases, including Jews passing for Gentiles, Polish immigrants preferring to be German, Italians pretending to be Jewish, the Japanese Eta concealing their group identity to avoid discrimination, the Anglo-Indians passing as British, and the Cape Colored as well as mixed bloods in the Caribbean and in Latin America moving into the white groups (Sollors, 247).

The many instances of racial passing throughout history, suggests that this practice may have been an option for several persons from minorities, in order to be granted the privileges of the dominant populations. Although it was less common, some white people also passed as black – most of the time to succeed in the domains of music and love. African Americans' passing is so common that Werner Sollors claims that the word "passing" is the shorthand for "passing as white" – in society, passing is associated with African Americans. I will discuss this practice of passing as white in my thesis – African Americans passing as white in order to access their privileges. Given the complexity of the subject of passing, it cannot be limited to a simple definition, yet Sollors's definition can serve as an introduction to my thesis: "The act of identifying oneself or accepting identification as a white person – used of a person having some Negro blood" (Sollors, 247). I would further argue that passing also entails crossing the race line constructed by society, and the boundaries imposed by races.

This practice continued after the abolition of slavery – before and after the legalization of segregation with the Jim Crow laws. The sociologists James E. Conyers and T. H. Kennedy led a study on racial passing, and asked both Black and white students a specific question, which was "Why do you think a Negro would want to pass?". The students listed eight reasons: "Lack of

identification with other Negroes, fallen in love or married into the white race, to secure economic advantages, to hide one's past life, to secure equal social, cultural and recreational advantages, to have something to feel important about among other Negroes, to obtain some psychic thrill in fooling the white man." This study sheds light on the diversity of the reasons encouraging African Americans to pass as white, and like the characters in the three works under study, they can cross the race line for many reasons at the same time.

The three authors of the works under study grew up at different time periods, and evolved in different versions of American society, shaped by different race-related events, where interracial relations and discussions were different. Their own experiences of race and life in society must have influenced their works, and the purpose of their writing.

Given that my thesis analyzes the mechanisms of the Neo Passing Novel *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett, as a continuation of Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," I will begin by introducing Brit Bennett. I will introduce the subsequent authors in chronological order – an approach I will maintain throughout my thesis.

Brit Bennett is an African American essayist and a novelist focusing on race, identity, and family themes. She was born in 1989 in California. Although she did not grow up in the American South, her mother did, and the latter inspired Brit Bennett in the creation of the hometown of Mallard in *The Vanishing Half*. She indeed told her about a real town in Louisiana, whose name Bennett did not reveal, where the inhabitants were obsessed with skin color. Brit Bennett has also always been aware of colorism because of her own observations in society. Bennett is involved in the repudiation of racially-motivated crimes occurring in her society. After the acquittal of the police officer who murdered Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American teenager in 2014, Brit Bennet wrote an essay entitled "I Don't Know What to Do With Good White People." In this work, she denounces the strange racial dynamics in the United States, and shares her own experience as a Black woman surrounded by white people. She acknowledges that they were well-meaning to her, yet her interactions with white people were still carrying the complexity of her society's interracial relations. She also states that being nice to an African American person does not absolve a white person of racism. Considering her implication in systemic race dynamics, Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* may aim at denouncing those dynamics, while demonstrating that race is solely a social construct, as its boundaries can be crossed.

Nella Larsen was an African American author, who was herself born to a Black father and a white mother, in 1891 – like Clare Kendry. Larsen was born and grew up during the Jim Crow laws era, and died in 1964. In this regard, she experienced segregation and racism. Besides her mixed racial heritage, a parallel can be drawn between Larsen and her novella, as she was born in Chicago – the city where Clare and Irene met while passing. She also lived, like Irene Redfield, in Harlem, during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s – when her novella was published. Considering this, not only does Larsen's *Passing* mirror the 1920s American society, but it also probably echoes Larsen's own internal conflict as a mixed woman during segregation. Although the "One Drop Rule" was legally acknowledged in 1924, it was already engrained in the American society's race discussions; this suggests that Larsen's racial identity may have been imposed on her. Unlike Clare, she may have been deprived of the possibility to determine her own racial identity.

Like many African American artists who desired to celebrate the Black identity, Nella Larsen belonged to the African American cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance. The purpose of the movement was to shape the image of the *New Negro*. The artists of the Harlem Renaissance were willing to be in rupture with what they considered the "Old Negro":

> A creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism. The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence. So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being – a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden (Locke, 3).

The wish for the emergence of a "New Negro" corresponds to the perspective of a new generation of African Americans who will not have to suffer the humiliation, the pain, and the passivity endured by the previous generations because of the white domination. In his chapter "The New Negro," Alain Locke claims that the "Old Negro," is more a myth and a counter-example that African Americans have been unconsciously forced to mimic, and embody in society. In this regard, by reinventing Black literature, and reinventing African American identity, the Black

population would evolve along with this shift. Locke wished for a new generation of independent, educated, and self-assertive African Americans, and for the gain of agency over the image of the Black individual. Yet Passing novels, like Larsen's *Passing*, both align with his vision and challenge it.

Larsen provides a complex portrayal of African Americans during racial segregation. Nella Larsen's novella paradoxically fits in Locke's perception, and at the same time, defies it, for success aligns with the appropriation of whiteness. One has to reject one's Black identity to access privileges. The practice of passing allows for the evolution of African Americans in society, but at the same time, it portrays Blackness as the impossibility for success and freedom. While Locke conveys and encourages racial pride, Larsen's characters contrast with this idea, as they covet white privileges, and conceal their Black identity. Larsen's novella also debunks Locke's arguments, for it portrays race as fragile and unstable. Despite Clare Kendry's progressive reconnection with her Black race, Irene – who used to embody the "New Negro" until her encounter with Clare –is progressively in rupture with her Black self. Larsen may indirectly suggest that despite the African Americans' will to evolve and to reach a better status, race is unfixed – one African American can internalize white values and covet the privileges that whiteness grants.

Like Larsen, Bennet demonstrates that race is unfixed and unstable through the character of Stella, but she also proves that it can be unconsciously erased. For instance, Stella's daughter, Kennedy Sanders, is both Black and white, yet she is not aware of her Black heritage, and identifies as solely white. Her character sheds light on the flexibility of race – it is malleable, redefinable, and it can be imposed on one.

Toni Morrison was an African American author who was born in 1931, during the Great Migration, and who died in 2019. Her parents migrated in Ohio to escape the American South. Like Larsen, Toni Morrison also experienced segregation. Like in her short story, Morrison witnessed the race-related shifts in her society, such as the Civil Rights Movements and the desegregation in the United States. Her works focus on the Black community, and mostly on Black female experience.

Toni Morrison's reappropriation of the Passing novel could inscribe her short story in the movement of the Neo Passing Novel. While Passing novels usually show that race is unfixed, and constructed, through racial navigation, Morrison purposefully makes her characters pass, to

demonstrate that race is a social construct. Her different approach of passing makes her work innovative. This novelty paves the way for the reinvention of the tradition of the Passing Novel.

The concept of the "Tragic Mulatto" is reinvented and appropriated by the authors. In her article "Old Stereotypes Made New: A Textual Analysis on the Tragic Mulatto Stereotype in Contemporary Hollywood." the scholar Brandale Mills defines this trope: "The Tragic Mulatto was first introduced to American literature as a representative of a biracial woman, who struggled with their identity as neither Black nor white. This racial duality led them to lives of constant sorrow, distress, and resignation that often ended in death or suicide" (Mills, 3). In Bennett's novel, the "mulatta" is no longer tragic. Despite the tragedy that shaped her childhood, with her father's racially-motivated murder, Stella progressively severs ties with her past, and unconsciously rejects her fate as the "Tragic mulatto." In Larsen's novella, although Clare Kendry's passing ends with her death, she is not the only "mulatta" to be impacted by this tragic event – Clare's death may also grant Irene the status of "Tragic mulatto." In Morrison's short story, Maggie, who could be perceived as the "Tragic mulatto," is not violated for the torment provoked by her potential double racial heritage, rather for the torment within the other characters – more especially within Twyla and Roberta – provoked by their obsession with race.

Beyond the theme of passing, the theme of interracial families is developed. Yet interraciality is presented as a secret, a piece of information which cannot be revealed, except for Gertrude and her husband in Larsen's *Passing*. However, this knowledge is limited to the private sphere.

Since passing involves crossing racial boundaries, race must be defined. The definition of this term changed and evolved throughout generations. It was initially used to refer to family ties until Kant extended its use to designate humankind and the way people can be differentiated by physical traits. Like in Larsen's *Passing*, and in many Passing novels, the Bible contributes to the construction of race. While the Black race is believed to originate from Ham's sins in Passing novels, anthropologists believed in the idea that humankind is Adam and Eve's offspring. Yet two schools of thoughts were in opposition: the monogenists and the polygenists. On the one hand, monogenists used to think that Adam and Eve were the original ancestors of the whole of humankind, and that the creation of races was the result of an evolutionary process provoked by the environment. For monogenists, the existence of what they considered inferior races, was the

consequence of their failure to adapt to the European physical traits. On the other hand, some polygenists were convinced that Adam was solely the ancestor of Jews, and that other races were the offspring of pre-Adamites. Nevertheless, some polygenists rejected the idea that humankind descended from Biblical figures.

In the eighteenth century, George Buffon "designated traits of skin color, stature, and bodily figure as the criteria for six race categories. Like his scientific predecessors, Buffon judged variations in human types according to the degree to which they differed from 'white people'" (Fortney, 36). The comparison to white people suggests that white skin was considered the norm. During the same century, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach adopted a monogenist approach of race. He claimed that the whole of humankind had one common ancestor, but he determined five "varieties" and later called them races. He identified Oriental, American Indian, Caucasian, Malay, and Ethiopian as respectively the brown, red, white, yellow and black races.

Despite the popularity of the Biblical theories, many anthropologists shared Darwin's monogenist theory, that all species shared a common ancestor, yet Darwin advanced that some races were less-evolved and that race was hereditary. However, many of his successors misused his theories to establish racial hierarchies, and promote racism. Before the mid-twentieth century, race studies described race as a scientific and genealogical concept, yet in 1950, the meeting of geneticists and physical anthropologists shifted the perception of race, and identified race as more of a social construct than a genealogical process. In this regard, Nella Larsen was ahead of her time, as her 1929 novella portrays race as a social construct.

The three authors employ nonlinear narratives. Bennett's novel alternates between past and present, beginning in the 1950s before inserting an ellipsis that situates most of her narrative between the 1960s and the late1970s. Larsen also alternates between past and present, but the time span in *Passing* is shorter, as the ellipsis covers two years. Larsen's novella takes place earlier than Bennett's, as her narrative takes place in the late 1920s – a time period when most of the Passing narratives take place. In Morrison's "Recitatif," the timeline is not clearly defined, yet the hints she provides allow her readers to approximate the time period. Based on those clues, her short story likely unfolds between the 1960s and the 1980s. The larger timeline in both Bennett's and Morrison's works allows for an evolving portrayal of passing across history, and shows the evolution of race relations in the United States. Cyclicality is recurrent in the three works.

“Recitatif” is the French word for “recitative,” which corresponds to a style of music, in which the singer adopts a spoken tone. This style is used in opera, oratorio or cantata in order to make the plot progress. Considering this, the title of Morrison’s short story prepares the readers for a narrative shaped by recurring encounters between the protagonists. The title of the short story also reflects Morrison’s intent to spark debate among readers, as the interactions and argumentations during debates create rhythm. Like in recitatives, those debates which occur between the readers, and which mirror the protagonists’ debates, contribute to the progress of the narrative, and of Morrison’s purpose through the short story.

Since the beginning of the literary tradition of the Passing Novel, American society evolved along with the mentalities of the citizens. These changes called out to changes in the contemporary narratives, as well as in the construction of the characters, while preserving the tradition. My purpose in this thesis is to study the Neo Passing Novel in all its forms, as a heritage of the Harlem Renaissance, and as a reinvention through generations. The first chapter of this dissertation will study the dual existence of the passing characters, who are torn between their true nature and the adoption of a new race, and the necessity for acting to align with the character of the white woman. An analysis of the different ways by which the protagonists cross the race line will be developed. The second chapter of this thesis will focus on the notion of loss, and the inevitable sacrifices to successfully pass as white, as well as the isolation of the passing characters provoked by the isolation of their secret. The idea that a tragic ending of the passing performance does not necessarily inscribe in the tradition of passing penalties will be shown, as the death of the passing character may be deceiving. Yet the passing character is not always punished and condemned, their passing can be considered successful despite the discovery of the secret by some characters, and the torment provoked by the infallibility of passing within the protagonists can serve as punishment, mirroring the readers’ torment.

I) Passing and duality

1) Navigating races

In the three literary works under study, some African American characters possess a light complexion. The Vignes twins Desiree and Stella indeed have a light skin as well as Kennedy, even if she is not aware of her African American heritage; Clare Kendry, Irene Redfield and Maggie also are light-skinned. This fairness can be seen as a privilege, for it gives them the ability to navigate the Black race and the white race. Racial fluidity suggests that, for those characters, race is unfixed, it can vary and adapt to situations, or to people for an indefinite time. In these works, racial fluidity is used for comfort and freedom purposes by those characters, as it gives them access to whites' privileges in a segregated or post-segregation society.

In the three works under study, race is portrayed as unfixed. The navigation of races challenges the society's idea of race by proving that its boundaries can be more or less easily crossed without anyone being aware of the passing. In both Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and Larsen's *Passing*, Stella Vignes and Clare Kendry take the decision to pass as white – navigating races is a way to agency. Yet despite their decision to pass, some characters make the passing characters navigate races by misidentifying their ethnicity. In "Recitatif," Toni Morrison expects her readers to misidentify Twyla's and Roberta's ethnicities, for them to become aware of the society's race construct. The different forms of passing in these three works, demonstrate that passing can have different purposes – it is either a way to agency, or used as a tool to deconstruct the idea of race.

a) Race fluidity

In Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half,* the skin color of the twins Desiree and Stella Vignes enables them to pass as white. However, Stella only decides to pass while Desiree chooses to remain in the race she was born in, the Black race. Racial fluidity is highlighted by the fact that two identical twins chose in what race they would live, and that they chose not to belong to the same one. Their two identical bodies are perceived and interpreted in different ways from a racial perspective, and because of that, they no longer are compatible. Stella rejects Desiree because the latter embodies the

Black life Stella actually wanted to leave behind, and which would prevent her from being free. Desiree indeed identifies as a woman of color, even when she could miss a job opportunity: "she [the recruiter] glanced at her application, stumbling where the girl [Desiree] had marked colored" (Bennett, 2020, 19). Desiree's honesty over her racial identification reveals that she refuses to pass in order to live a privileged life – she chooses to stay true to herself. Applying for that job as a woman of color is a risk, for she could not be hired because of her race. In addition, the recruiter's reaction to the discovery of Desiree's race contributes to racial fluidity, as the verb "stumbling" suggests her confusion and her hesitation regarding the race she should assign to Desiree. The recruiter identified Desiree as white when she saw her, so Desiree's honesty highlights the latter's desire to identify as Black. She indeed does not look Black physically, so she could have passed for this job interview. Yet, by applying as a Black woman, she suggests that she will not lie about her origins for success, she will not borrow a white identity to obtain what she wants.

For Stella, passing means freedom. One of the many whites' privileges is freedom, as the following dialogue between the twin sisters implies: "'You did all this for a man?' 'Not for him,' she said. 'I just liked who I was with him.' 'White.' 'No,' Stella said. 'Free'" (Bennett, 2020, 341). Stella dissociates freedom from whiteness, but both notions are actually related because her relationship with Blake – her white husband – freed her from poverty. However, that union was possible only because she pretended to be white. In addition, racial fluidity is suggested by Desiree here, as she highlights her sister's ability to be white when she is with her white husband: her race adapts to her environment. It also suggests that Stella could not be white in Mallard with her Black family.

Interestingly enough, the physical description of the two protagonists can fit in the two races, for they are described as "twin girls, creamy skin, hazel eyes, wavy hair" (Bennett, 2020, 7). This description of the twins' physical appearance is closer to the description of white persons, but because the narrator previously retraced their mixed heritage, those physical characteristics can also correspond to Black characters, as this is who they are. What enables them to navigate these races is the way their physical appearance is perceived by other characters and how the twins display it.[1]

As with Bennett's characters, Nella Larsen's characters in *Passing* can shift between both the Black and white races. Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield use this physical privilege, as they both use whiteness as a way to access comfort. For Clare, who passes permanently, this practice also allows her to access freedom. The latter has a double racial heritage, as she was born Black, but received a white education which actually saved her from poverty and misery, for Clare's white aunts welcomed her after her father's death, and contributed to the creation of her white character. The interrogative "But do you realize, Rene, that if it hadn't been for them, I shouldn't have had a home in the world?"

[1]These notions will be developed in another chapter of this work.

(Larsen, 1929, 26) proves this argument, for the question mark stresses Clare's will to make Rene realize that her white side saved her life. The use of the article "them" designates Clare's white aunts, and also the white community, because being raised by Black people and privileging her Black side would have led her nowhere. The modal in the negative structure "shouldn't" suggests that Blackness has no place in society – it would have condemned her.

Like in *The Vanishing Half,* "passing interrogates the meaning of race. Rather than an essential entity it can be performed as 'Black' women put on and take off 'whiteness'" (Mitchell & Taylor, 43). As race is interchangeable for those characters, they have the opportunity to choose their race, they are not condemned to receive the treatment given to Black people, as they are able to cross the race line to escape it. Those mixed-raced characters represent "the literary figure of the mulatto who easily crossed the borders between Black and white social offered an implicit critique of racial segregation" (Mitchell & Taylor, 156). Mitchell and Taylor use the adverb "easily," which suggests that this capacity to navigate races can be perceived as a privilege and an effortless task. Nevertheless, this thesis hopes to demonstrate that passing is not an easy practice and not just a matter of looking white, other factors participate in it like the behavior, the way of speaking, the background and other elements which will be developed in another part. Moreover, as the authors highlight, those mulatto figures and the theme of Passing are actually a critique of racial segregation, because passing proves the inefficiency and the incoherence of Segregation.

Segregation indeed relied on the separation of the white and the Black races; white people associated individuals with a dark or olive skin to the Black race as well as individuals who had physical features proper to Black people. However, the practice of passing proved that the whites' construction of the Black race is wrong, as it is not necessarily representative of reality, and also that Black people are as capable as white people to prosper in society. It also reveals the superficiality of the segregation laws because whoever seemed white to white people could live in the white side of society. Seeming to be white and actually be white are two disparate concepts. Passing then shows that white people hate difference, i.e. a differing physical appearance, and not necessarily the Black race, because those passing characters are easily accepted in the white society as long as nobody knows that they are actually African American.

In his chapter "Excursus on the 'Tragic Mulatto,'" Werner Sollors tackles the theme of passing and explains how the cultural, historical and social context of the United States inspired racial and interracial literature, and how this context is actually described in this literature. Sollors also explains what motivated some African American people and African American characters to pass as white. Sollors's approach of the ability to cross the racial line corresponds to Clare's case in *Passing,* since she is a mulatto:

> In many cases literary Mulattoes were able to cross racial boundaries that were considered fixed, real, or even natural. This ability is what made them such ideal questioners of the status quo. It is also what led to the emergence of the popular literary theme of crossing lines. For, as Caleb Johnson put in 1931, "[c]rossing the color line is so common an occurrence that the Negroes have their own well-understood word for it. They call it 'Passing'" (Sollors, 245).

Clare's double racial heritage indeed attributes her the status of literary Mulatto. Her ability to navigate races questions the construction of races, and what were thought to be their limits. It also reveals that race is mostly based on one's physical appearance and on its perception. To call this practice 'passing' is to extend this perception of race, since it debunks the idea that race is fixed and implies the passage from one race to another. However, the fact that it is claimed that only Black people call it 'passing' suggests that the idea of a fluid race is believed possible by Black people only; white people do not necessarily share this vision of race, or except those who pass as Black. These white people who pass as Black can experience racial navigation and believe in the idea that race is unfixed. In this regard, passing:

> Is a form of deception, hence dishonest. Yet this only works as long as it is taken for granted that partial ancestry may have the power to become totally defining. This aspect of passing distinguishes it from true masquerades in which an identity choice need not at all connect with any part of the masked person's particular background. 'Passing' can thus justly be described as a social invention, as a 'fiction of law and custom' (Mark Twain) that makes one part of a person's ancestry real, essential, and defining, and other parts accidental, mask-like, and insignificant (Sollors, 249).

Passing is then a navigation between races but also between one's personal ancestry, it is a personal racial navigation. Passing as white masks one's Black ancestry.

The navigation between the white and the Black races is different in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," because it is not the characters who pass but the narrator who makes them pass. The narrator, who is the future version of the character Twyla, claims, from the beginning, that one of the characters is Black and the other is white. That statement makes both Twyla and Roberta navigate races because the narrator does not reveal which one of them is Black and which one is white. Readers are expected to find out by guessing their race. Readers probably make them pass too because their hypotheses may be wrong. In her article "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation," Elizabeth Abel shares her own perception of her reading of Morrison's "Recitatif" and explains why readers tend to think that Twyla is the Black character, but she also explains that some cultural elements debunk this hypothesis. In this article, Abel claims that "by

forcing us to construct racial categories from highly ambiguous social cues, 'Recitatif' elicits and exposes the unarticulated racial codes that operate at the boundaries of consciousness" (Abel, 472). Morrison indeed positions the main characters as racial opposites and makes readers think that they know who is designated as 'them' or 'they' because of their stereotypes. Abel focuses on two comments made by Twyla, as the narrator, and by Roberta at different stages of their lives. She selected the narrator's sentence "Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world" (Morrison, 1983, 21) and Roberta and Twyla's interaction: "'Well, it is a free country.' 'Not yet, but it will be'" (Morrison, 1983, 30). Abel describes the narrator's tone as "a voice of seemingly racial resentment" (Abel, 475) and adds that "in Twyla's envy of Roberta, 'Everything is so easy for them,' and in her challenge to the status quo – it's not a free country 'but it will be' – is class rather than (or perhaps compounded by) racial resentment, the adult economic counterpart to Twyla's childhood fantasy of Roberta's plenitude" (Abel, 476).

The narrator's comment echoes her description of her encounter with Roberta at St-Bonaventure when she claims that "they smelled funny" (Morrison, 1983, 4), because the use of the pronoun 'they' designates Roberta's race, including Roberta, and also stresses racial oppositions and cultural discrepancies.

This racial navigation is possible because both Twyla's and Roberta's cultures, social ranks, husbands and political actions could be hints to discover their race, for those enumerated elements can determine one's race according to the racial constructions. The situation of those characters at different times of the narrative provokes confusion within the readers regarding the race they assigned the protagonists. When Twyla and Roberta are still children, their mothers' attitude could guide the readers in their investigation. Twyla was indeed malnourished by her mother as "Mary's idea of supper was popcorn and a can of Yoo-hoo" (Morrison, 1983, 6) which explains Twyla's appreciation for St. Bonny's food. That undernutrition reveals Twyla's and her mother's poverty, and leads the readers to perceive Twyla as Black because African Americans are more often associated with low incomes. Moreover, the mothers' encounter suggests racism:

> Mary simpleminded as ever, grinned and tried to yank her hand out of the pocket with the raggedy lining – to shake hands, I guess. Roberta's mother looked down at me and then looked down at Mary too. She didn't say anything, just grabbed Roberta with her Bible-free hand and stepped out of line, walking quickly to the rear of it. […] Then this light bulb goes off in her head and she says, "That bitch!" really loud and us almost in the chapel now (Morrison, 1983, 12-13).

The reaction of Roberta's mother reflects her haughty attitude and may suggest racism against African American Mary. Mary's reaction reinforces the readers' hypothesis about her African American

identity because members of this community tend to be perceived as uncivilized, so her rude intervention as well as the lack of respect for that religious place perpetuate the readers' opinion. Like their respective daughters, the mothers are positioned as opposites because Roberta's mother is religious whereas Twyla's mother disrespects religion.

When the main characters meet during their teenage years, Twyla is "working behind the counter at the Howard Johnson's" (Morrison, 1983, 15). The name of that place may refer to African American artists bearing the same name: one was a jazz musician and the other is a soul singer. However, it can also refer to the white lyricist Howard Johnson. Despite the parallel which can be drawn between these artists and the name of the diner, the name Howard can also refer to the historically Black Howard University. This link between Twyla and the Black history associated with this name may indicate that she is African American. Her job as a waitress reinforces the idea that she is Black, because the comparison with Roberta, in terms of class, positions her in a lower social status than Roberta. The latter indeed can afford a trip to the Coast and as stereotypes suggest, people from the same class and race remain together so, since one of her friends is going to a Jimi Hendrix's concert, it is possible that Roberta can also afford a concert ticket. As poverty is associated with Black people, wealth is more associated with white people, which suggests that Roberta is the white character. Nevertheless, some readers may be confused by the contradictions between Roberta's supposed whiteness and her friends liking an African American artist, even displaying a certain familiarity towards him because one of her friends claims that "he's got an appointment with Hendrix" (Morrison, 1983, 17). The readers' confusion is further reinforced by Twyla's ignorance of this artist, as the use of the pronoun 'she' in her question "Hendrix? […] What's she doing now?" (Morrison, 1983, 18) reveals. For the readers, the fact that an African American character does not know about the legend Jimi Hendrix is disturbing. It can be explained by the fact that in the late sixties, "Jimi Hendrix appealed more to white than to Black audiences" (Abel, 474). This piece of information may confirm the readers' hypothesis, yet this hypothesis is challenged again when the two characters encounter as adults.

Twyla's marriage situation would suggest that she is the Black character. In the societal construction of race, Blackness is indeed necessarily associated with poverty because of the racial history and the lack of professional opportunities for African Americans. However, Twyla can also be perceived as the white character because, despite the fact that Roberta has a good financial situation, Roberta's husband works as an IBM executive. Historically, in order to promote diversity and inclusion, the IBM hired African Americans and Roberta's husband may be one of those African Americans hired by the company. Yet, this detail does not necessarily mean that Roberta is Black, because the fact that her couple formed with her husband is intra-racial is never specified in the narrative. That idea also applies to the couple formed by Twyla and her husband, who may be white

as he is a fireman in New York. Since New York firemen were predominantly white in the 1970s, Twyla's husband may be white; Abel mentions the "racial exclusiveness of the firemen's union in upstate New York, where the story is set, we read […] Twyla as working-class white" (Abel, 476). However, once again, the mention of Twyla's intra-racial marriage is not present in the text.

Moreover, the interpretation of the Chinese chauffeur can differ according to the race given to Roberta and can be a hint to read that character's race. If one thinks that Roberta is white, this hierarchical relation between the chauffeur and her can represent the social and financial superiority of white people: a character from a minority is at the service of a white employer and his wage relies on that white character. If one thinks that Roberta is Black, the employment of a Chinese chauffeur can be perceived as an act of minorities empowerment, and an act of interracial solidarity because she offers him a job. If Twyla is indeed the white character and Roberta the Black one, it debunks the idea that a financial situation participates in the construction of race. If one identifies Twyla as white, her intervention and the use of the pronoun "them" in "Everything is so easy for them" can be interpreted as a demonstration of racism, she may be annoyed that African Americans access wealth and that she does not – that African Americans access the privileges believed to belong to white people. However, this sentence sounds more like a sentence which could be pronounced by a Black person observing the white superiority in society. If Twyla is identified as Black, her comment can be understood as an observation of racial injustice, she highlights white superiority.

In addition, the different positions of Twyla and Roberta regarding the debate on busing can lead to different readings of their race too. Busing was "the practice of transporting students to schools within or outside their local school districts as a means of rectifying racial segregation."[2] Twyla is in favor of busing which leads the readers to perceive her as a Black mother who wants the end of school segregation and to allow her Black children to be integrated into society – to access the same privileges and opportunities as white students. Unlike Twyla, Roberta is against busing and the opposition to this practice would position her as a white mother, or in her case, as a white step-mother who is scared of racial mixing and of the shift it could provoke within the white school system; Roberta's opinion can make her appear like a racist white woman. However, Twyla's agreement with that project can also reveal her white identity. Her support of busing can be interpreted as a way for a white mother to show her agreement with the changing American society, the desire for diversity and the will to treat African Americans as their equals. Roberta's refusal of that project can be seen as the way for a Black mother to protect and preserve her Black children from racism, the desire not to remove them from their comfort zone, and her refusal to use her own children as political tools. It

[2] DeWitt, and Douglas. "Busing | Definition, History, and Facts." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2 July 2015, www.britannica.com/topic/busing.

can also suggest that she refuses to send her children to a white school because it would mean that white schools are better than Black schools, it would contribute to the perpetuation of the idea of white superiority.

All those elements are perceived as tricks as Begoña Simal-González explains in her article "Playing with (Un)Marked Cards: Intersectionality in Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif'" in which she invites the readers to become intersectional readers. The latter writes that Morrison, in "the spirit of true literary tricksterism, leaves a trail of intriguing clues that apparently lead in one direction, only to provide new hints pointing in the opposite direction a few moments later" (Simal-González, 99). Her strategy is designated as a 'trick,' as Morrison's hints actually do not serve to guess the characters' race. It is indeed intended to make the readers realize that what they believed to be a characteristic belonging to one race was, in fact, a stereotype which contrasted with their initial construction of race. This theme of 'trick' serves to deconstruct the readers' idea of race and break the stereotypes.

According to Simal-González, Morrison's strategy leads the readers to become intersectional observers as she states: "it is not my intention to read each character in 'Recitatif' 'intersectionally'; instead, we can (and should) become 'intersectional' observers ourselves, by interlocking race and class in our close reading of Morrison's story" (Simal-González, 103). The author invites the readers to study the intersection of race and class in order to read the characters, rather than labelling them and assigning them a race. With this proposition, the author of the article implicitly asks the readers to observe, analyze, and study those characters' characteristics, instead of forcing them to fit in a specific race through the readers' judgement.

Finally, the way the two protagonists' names resonate within the readers could be a hint to discover their race. However, even though the name Twyla sounds more "Black" than the name Roberta for most of the readers, celebrities who bear those names debunk this hypothesis. Indeed, "if Twyla's name is more characteristically Black than white, it is perhaps best known as the name of a white dancer, Twyla Tharp, whereas Roberta shares her last name, Fisk, with a celebrated Black (now integrated) university. The text's heterogeneous inscriptions of race resist a totalizing reading" (Abel, 476). The relation between Morrison's characters and these celebrities cannot be proved, which creates confusion within the readers. Morrison's Twyla might have indeed been named after Twyla Tharp and Morrison's Roberta may have been named after the famous Black university, and these two elements may be the revelation of their race. It could also be the contrary, and a way for the author to prove that one's name cannot determine their race. Otherwise, it could be another misleading track, as the protagonists may have nothing to do with this dancer and this university. My point is that, both Twyla and Roberta can be identified as Black, and both of them can be identified as white as well. However, the determination of their race depends on the readers' knowledge, to what extent they know about these contradictions purposefully established by the author in order to mask the

protagonists' actual race. It also depends on stereotypes, which contribute to the readers' construction of race. Sollors states that "the Negro is too often portrayed as a *stereotype*" (Sollors, 229), by writing this short story, Morrison agrees with this statement and demonstrates how Black people are stereotyped.

Twyla and Roberta make Maggie racially fluid through their debate over her race. The divergence of opinion between the two creates the fluidity. Both Twyla and Roberta indeed perceive Maggie differently, that opposition between the protagonists creates confusion regarding Maggie's actual race. That debate echoes the one taking place among the readers to identify Twyla's and Roberta' race. If the two characters do not identify Maggie in the same race, it means that Maggie's physical appearance can fit in the two races. That also means that the race the two friends assign to Maggie is based on elements which belong to their own construction of race, like Maggie's job, clothes, and attitude. Those factors are associated with each race and correspond to the protagonists' perception of race.

The readers identify the characters' race according to their own race: the readers will necessarily identify the characters with whom they share similar characteristics in the same race as them. This system allows Morrison, her narrator, and her readers to make the characters navigate, through their comprehension of their reading, but never allows the characters to navigate by themselves. The characters are passive regarding their racial identification as they are never able to reveal their race, their race depends solely on the readers' hypotheses.

The definition of passing implies that characters make the decision to pass, that they have racial agency. Yet, those characters are not necessarily active in terms of racial identification. Some scholars, like Abena P. A. Busia, think that a passing character has agency, as she states:

> Though many critics read this work ["Recitatif"] in the context of "passing" narratives, this concept implies some agency or desire to "pass for white" and there is absolutely no suggestion that the Black character in this story is doing anything of the kind. Rather, to read it as such is to fall into the very conventional clichés of reading that the story has been so very carefully crafted to challenge (Busia, 104).

Morrison's work indeed demonstrates that race is not a universal construct, but rather an individual one, and that the construction of race should not be based on stereotypes. Through the accumulation of stereotypes, debunked by the intended incoherence of the information given by Morrison, the latter also reveals the white construct of Blackness. However, reading this short story as a passing narrative is not to fall into these clichés, it is also challenging the traditional passing, because it highlights the passive aspect of passing. Superficially, Stella Vignes, Clare Kendry, and Irene Redfield seem to be active because they are able to identify in the race they want to, and are also able to identify in both

the white and the Black races; but actually, their choice is not solely theirs, as it is based on white society. Stella and Clare decide to adopt a white life, for they want to be free in a segregated or post-segregation society. If white people had not segregated society, if white people and Black people had been perceived as equals, Black people would have kept identifying as Black. In Irene's case it is different, because she identifies as Black, but she also passes and despises her Black life. That identification to the Black race is hypocritical and this hypocrisy was indirectly forced by the whites' influence: if Black people had not been considered inferior to white people, Irene would have not hated being Black. Thus, those passing characters' agency in terms of race is superficial, because their decisions are just the consequences of whites' decisions and laws. In "Recitatif," Twyla and Roberta are totally racially passive and their racial voice is never heard. They mention race, debate over race and even take part in a race-related political protest, but never position themselves, the readers never know what their racial identification is.

Regarding the ability to navigate races, Bennett's Stella Vignes perpetuates Nella Larsen's traditional way of making Clare Kendry pass as white, whereas Desiree Vignes's way of being Black and of identifying as such cannot be seen as the perpetuation of Irene Redfield's way. Indeed, even if Desiree passes at some point in the narrative, she does it only for necessary reasons: she passes in order to find her lost twin sister, and she hates it, contrary to Irene who takes advantage of this privilege for comfort reasons. In the case of Morrison's short story, her characters' passing is in total rupture with the traditional Passing Novel, but it influences the Neo Passing Novel.

Bennett, like Larsen, indeed creates a mixed character who passes, but she also tries to mislead her readers the way Morrison does, when, at the beginning of the novel, Bennett's narrator suggests that Desiree Vignes will be the twin who will pass. The narrator indeed claims that "Desiree imagined herself escaping into the city and becoming an actress" (Bennett, 2020, 8), or when the narrator states that Desiree is the one who wanted to escape Mallard: "the idea hadn't been Stella's at all-during that final summer, it was Desiree who'd decided to run away after the picnic" (Bennett, 2020, 8). Indeed, "Desiree had always fantasized about life outside of this little farm town" (Bennett, 2020, 8). From the beginning, the narration suggests that Desiree is the twin with agency, seeking freedom. As a Black character in a segregated society, the only way to reach freedom is by passing as white. At first reading, if Desiree had not been returning to Mallard with a dark child, the readers could have thought that she is the passing character in this narrative. However, hints actually show that Stella will later be the one twin who is passing in this novel. Even if the fact that Bennett misleads her readers is reminiscent of Morrison's strategy, unlike the latter, Bennett reveals who the passing character is and the hints are conclusive. Stella is the one who actually possesses the skills to live a passing life, as she is able to keep many secrets. She can adapt her personality to her entourage, she dreams of a good future, and she is a good learner.

The shift between the white and the Black races is possible because race is fluid for those characters, it is not fixed. Stella and Clare started their lives as Black characters and decided to continue it as white ones. Loretta Walker's hand reading suggests that Stella's passage from the Black to the white race was not as fluid as Clare's. The reading indeed reveals that Stella lived two lives, it implies that her Black self metaphorically died for her to become white. Loretta indeed reads in Stella's hands that the latter lived two separate lives as Loretta tells Stella: "It means your life's been interrupted" (Bennett, 2020, 190).

In Clare's case, the transition from one race to the other is constant when the narrative starts, because Clare lives as a white woman but still spends time with Black characters and attends Black events like the Negro Welfare League dance. Her constant navigation then makes her more racially fluid than Stella. However, the readers cannot know if Clare has always been racially fluid because they do not have access to Clare's life from the moment she started to live with her aunts as a Black girl, to the moment she started to pass as white.

In Morrison's work, Twyla and Roberta constantly navigate races, which makes them extremely racially fluid because the author's purpose is to confuse the readers regarding the characters' race. Throughout the story, the readers constantly change the characters' race, but at the level of Twyla and Roberta, there is no clue suggesting that they change race. The mystery about Maggie's race also remains.

In the three works, the women's race is confirmed or guessed in relation to their respective marriages: Stella is perceived as white because it is obvious that a white man marries a white woman in the 1970s US; Clare is perceived as white because it is obvious that a racist white man marries a white woman in the 1920-30s US. Since Twyla's husband seems to be a Black man, Twyla is then believed to be a Black woman, and since Roberta's husband seems to be a white man, Roberta is read as a white woman. The unmixed couples that I just mentioned, follow a social belief that races do not mix; however, the couple composed of Gertrude and her husband in Larsen's *Passing*, highlights the idea that one's partner is not necessarily a factor to determine one's race. This aligns with Twyla's and Roberta's husbands, who are not necessarily hints to find the female characters' race.

b) The reinvention of Blackness

In the three works, Blackness is not constructed from a white perspective but redefined by Black authors and characters. In her work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison retraces the history of Black characters and the representation of African American people and culture in American literature, which she denounces as being built up solely in reference to white people. This marginalization of Black characters has constructed 'American Africanism.' Morrison criticizes the construction of 'Americanness' and the objectification of African American characters as well as the use of this culture to create the focus on whiteness in American literature. Toni Morrison highlights the complementarity of Blackness and whiteness in American literature. Blackness is then defined in relation to whiteness, as she states that "it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary 'Blackness,' the nature – even the cause – of literary 'whiteness'" (Morrison, 1992, 9). This quote demonstrates that both notions are related and dependent on each other. These notions are co-constructed. In order to highlight this interracial dependence, Morrison claims:

> Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny (Morrison, 1992, 52).

Morrison shows that this complementarity is actually a relation of contradictions. The Black race is constructed as being the opposite of the white race and vice-versa. In this definition, whiteness is constructed in two steps: it is what Blackness is not as the use of negation reveals, and it is defined with specific terms, which contrast with Blackness. The use of the conjunction 'but' reinforces the idea of opposition. In contrast, the definition of Blackness is negative, and only suggested, it is not explicitly defined like whiteness is. Morrison denounces this objectification and marginalization of Blackness which serves only to highlight whiteness. This quote can indeed define Blackness from a white perspective and be interpreted in two ways: Blackness can be perceived as the opposite of whiteness but also as what whiteness is not. Put differently, from a white perspective, Blackness is not really defined. For instance, if all the terms which define whiteness, placed after the conjunction 'but' are removed, Blackness would be defined as the opposite of whiteness. However, it would be a

negative construction, for the reading of this definition, as its opposite, would lead to move the negation in place of the conjunction 'but.' For instance, for the first example, it would define the Black figure as 'enslaved, not free.' Nevertheless, this definition of Blackness is a white construct, and the reappropriation of Blackness by Black authors and African American literature starts by deconstructing this white perspective. It also starts by proving that Blackness is not what whites' definition of Blackness is in American literature: The Black figure is not enslaved, not repulsive, not helpless, not history-less, not damned and not a blind accident of evolution. Nonetheless, this succession of negations does not offer a definition of Blackness in African American literature, it is then African American authors' mission to define Blackness and reinvent it.

In her article entitled "American Africanism: A Racialized Discourse of Literary Imagination in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination,*" Jebun Geeti discusses Toni Morrison's work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination.* She focuses on the notion of Blackness as a white creation in American literature. Geeti's article offers a new perspective on Morrison's reflection and reinforces the idea that the reappropriation of Blackness in African American literature is complex. The author claims:

> The whiteness persistently tends to reverse Blackness to a status of marginality and expurgation. Often that marginalization becomes direct and obvious that makes Blackness more complicated to explain by the Black authors as they are not granted full rights to examine Blackness in their own terms. It seems only the white critics/scholars possess the sole authorization to assess the insights and aptitudes of the Black. Morrison clearly explains her vulnerability and limitations as a Black female author […] (Geeti, 103).

Geeti agrees that in American literature, Blackness has never been defined in itself and as an independent concept. In this respect, the reappropriation of Blackness by Black authors is a delicate process because Blackness has always been objectified in American literature. The three works of my corpus offer a complementary and varied construction of Blackness; by reinventing Blackness from a Black perspective, Bennett and Larsen redefine Blackness and explore it in different ways. They explore Blackness and approach it from a Black perspective, while Morrison deconstructs the white construction of Blackness and the numerous stereotypes it has produced. Their works actually display 'Blacknesses' because they show different ways of being Black. However, in Passing novels, whiteness still impacts Blackness as the Black figure is disguised as a white figure or some Black characters imitate white characters.

In *The Vanishing Half,* Alphonse Decuir founded Mallard, a town where his reinvented Blackness could be perpetuated. He indeed created what he considered a "more perfect Negro"

(Bennett, 2020, 6) in "a town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like negroes. A third place" (Bennett, 2020, 6). The use of the adverb 'more' means that in this town, Black people are already considered perfect, but only because Alphonse Decuir's desire was to create a new category of Black people which would be superior, more adapted to society, and would have nothing to do with dark Black people. The creation of that third place originates from the light-skinned Black people's passivity against white people's refusal to consider them as their equals. It also originates from the light-skinned Black people's agency in a way, because they made the decision not to remain with dark Black people. The light-skinned Black people have been condemned by white people to remain on the other side of the race line, but Alphonse Decuir and his fellows chose to divide that other side of the race line. He created a town where Blackness is at the same time erased, because lightness is privileged, and perpetuated, and also reinvented. The inhabitants' double racial heritage indeed positions them in a racial in-between, they stand between white and Black. That town is the place where that new way of being Black can emerge and perpetuate. In this novel, races are separated and are not meant to mix up, this is the reason why darkness is condemned in Mallard. This hatred of dark Black people is actually paradoxical, because Alphonse Decuir considered all Black people "perfect" but created his town for a "more perfect" category of Black people. The hatred of Jude's father reveals this negative perception of dark Black people as Adele Vignes's perspective demonstrates:

> She leaned against the counter, watching the girl drink, searching her face for anything that reminded her of her daughters. But she could only see the child's evil daddy. Hadn't she told Desiree that a dark man would be no good to her? Hadn't she tried to warn her all her life? A dark man would trample her beauty. He'd love it at first but like anything he desired and could never attain, he would soon grow to resent it. Now he was punishing her for it (Bennett, 2020, 39).

This excerpt reveals that dark Black people are not considered trustful and respectable people, because they are called 'evil.' According to the definition given by the Cambridge Dictionary, "evil" means "morally bad or wrong" and "very cruel, bad, or harmful."[3] These two definitions apply to this extract because the narrative reveals that Jude's father has caused trouble to Desiree and has hurt her. The physical violence that Desiree endured is actually the motif for her return to Mallard - dark Black people are considered "the wrong sort of boy" (Bennett, 2020, 47).

Moreover, in Mallard, dark Black people are not seen as individuals but as a whole. Jude looks like her father only, and has nothing in common with her mother. Adele's failure to see a resemblance

[3] "Evil." dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/evil#google_vignette.

between Jude and her twins reinforces the idea of dark Black people's unity. That same idea is further reinforced in the dialogue between Jude and Louisa Rubidoux: "'But not your real mama, right?' […] 'Y'all don't look nothing alike.' Jude paused, then said, 'I look like my daddy'" (Bennett, 2020, 91). Despite the fact that Jude is mixed, because her mother has white ancestry, only her dark Black ancestry prevails, and erases the other half of her ancestry. Because her father is dark, Jude is also condemned to be dark; people cannot see her as Alphonse Decuir's descendant, nor as a Mallard inhabitant. Others despise her because she is automatically associated with dark evil people; they cannot see her as an individual because they cannot see beyond her skin color.

The twins have always been different from the other inhabitants and perceived as abnormal, they "both were a little crazy, Desiree perhaps the nuttiest of all. Playing white to get ahead was just a good sense. But marrying a dark man? Carrying his blueblack child? Desiree had courted the type of trouble that would never leave" (Bennett, 2020, 63). This quote reveals that their difference foreshadowed their departure from Mallard, and then, their rupture with its traditions. The adjective 'crazy' shows that their behavior was already condemned and not understood by the inhabitants; the twins were not made for that town as they did not align with its traditions. The fact that they were already perceived as crazy even before leaving Mallard, shows that they have never fit in the norm of Mallard's standards, that their attitude has always been interpreted as strange. To call Desiree 'nutty' and to highlight it with the superlative also demonstrates that Desiree was destined to rebel against Mallard's vision of Blackness.

Passing as white is better perceived than marrying a dark man, because passing is seen as a game, it does not seem serious to Mallard inhabitants as the verb 'playing' suggests. The use of the verb 'playing,' instead of the verb 'acting,' implies that in Mallard, passing is not perceived as a performance but as a game initiated to survive outside Mallard. It corresponds to young Stella's approach to passing, since she saw it as a game to obtain what she wanted, like when she pretended to be white to be able to get in a shop exclusively accessible to white people. Stella's reaction was excitement as she said: "'isn't it funny?' […] 'White folks, so easy to fool! Just like everyone says'" (Bennett, 2020, 73). That passing experience was just a game to her; as a little girl, she did not consider the risks because it allowed her to obtain what she wanted, just like in a game. She enjoyed that experience as the rhetorical question and the exclamative reveal: it emphasizes her excitement. In addition, the fact that other inhabitants think the same, shows that all of them are not conscious of the risks of passing. However, not all Mallard inhabitants see this practice as a game, since Willie Lee explained to Stella that "'it ain't no game,' […] 'Passin over. It's dangerous'" (Bennett, 2020, 74). His intervention sounds like a warning, as the practice that he is denouncing is framed by the claims that this is not a game and that it is dangerous; the use of short sentences creates a rhythm which highlights the most important terms, that is to say "no game," "passin," and "dangerous." The

shortness of his cue makes it efficient and clear: he condemns this practice. Despite some exceptions, passing as white is accepted by most of Mallard inhabitants because the purpose of this practice is to succeed, whereas having a dark Black family does not lead to success. Actually, it is a regression regarding Mallard's history, it does not correspond to the 'more perfect Negro' Alphonse Decuir imagined and expected. The rhetorical questions "But marrying a dark man? Carrying his blueblack child?" (63) transcribe Mallard inhabitants' disapproval of dark Black people, and especially of dark Black people and light-skinned people mixing up. Those questions reveal that Mallard inhabitants perceive this transgression of tradition as an absurdity, and the conjunction 'but' marks the condemnation of having a dark Black family.

Furthermore, the fact that these two rhetorical questions are in a row, creates a rhythm, an echo which insists on this refusal. It also creates a gradation, because the content of the second question "Carrying his blueblack child?" (63) makes the situation evoked in the first question "But marrying a dark man?" (63) worse: she left this dark man, but their daughter is actually the proof and the consequence of this transgressive union – impossible to forget. That idea is implied in the sentence which follows these rhetorical questions: "Desiree had courted the type of trouble that would never leave" (63). The verb 'courted' can be polysemic, as it can mean that Desiree dated her dark Black ex-husband, who would be referred to as 'the type of trouble' in this sentence, and the consequence is their dark Black baby. It can also be interpreted in a more literal way, meaning that Desiree got into trouble by making those decisions, and it will never be forgotten by Mallard inhabitants. In this regard, Desiree modifies the skin color standards of the town, and through her rebellious acts, she gains agency, as she lives her life according to her own desires and not according to traditions. By bringing her dark-skinned daughter to Mallard, Desiree rejects Alphonse Decuir's idea of Blackness, that is to say, dark Black people are on one side and light-skinned people on another. She indeed erases the line which exists between dark-skinned Black people and light-skinned Black people.

Finally, the African American folklore is reinvented in Bennett's novel. The famous tale of Tar Baby is indeed rewritten. The comparison "Black as tar" (Bennett, 2020, 3) to describe Jude's skin color, actually foreshadows Jude's association with this folklore figure. At this stage of the narrative, the two figures present similarities but do not form one entity, as they are still separated by the comparative term 'as.' Nevertheless, further in the narrative, not only is Jude nicknamed 'Tar Baby,' but she is also identified as Joel Chandler Harris's Tar Baby, the sticky and unreliable doll serving Brer Fox's wish to trick Brer Rabbit. Lonnie Goudeau indeed started to nickname Jude that way when "he found a copy of *Brer Rabbit* in the class bin and gleefully tapped the shiny Black blob on the cover. 'Look, it's Jude'" (Bennett, 2020, 89). By pointing the original doll on the book cover, by claiming that it is Jude and not by saying that it *looks like* Jude, the latter becomes the figure and not just a version of it. This identification dehumanizes Jude because she is reduced to an object. Like

Tar Baby, she is passive, because it implies that she was created to serve someone else's interests. Lonnie and the other classmates actually suppress her identity as Jude, since she is seen as Tar Baby only. In addition, the description of the Tar Baby doll reinforces Jude's dehumanization, because it is described as a stain, and does not seem to have a shape; despite the fact that it is supposed to be a doll, it does not have a human-like shape. Therefore, by identifying it as Jude, the latter is also deprived of a human shape and of an identity. Jude's skin color also determines her whole identity, she just looks like a tar stain, she is not even perceived as a human being; her identity is her skin color. Furthermore, the sentence "they called her Tar Baby" (Bennett, 2020, 88) highlights Jude's passivity, because the group designated by the pronoun 'they' has the power over the name given to Jude, as if they were naming an object. The group 'they' makes the action, makes the decision, whereas 'her,' which designates Jude, suffers it. However, Brit Bennett reinvents the Tar Baby story.

Jude, as Tar Baby in this narrative, indeed gains agency, she does not let her physical appearance determine her future, but actually creates it while leaving the place where she did not have the choice to come to. The geographical movement corresponds to the progression in her life, the more she moves, the more she evolves; she builds her own life. Her departure from Mallard represents the first step of her journey toward agency. When she is on the bus to Los Angeles, the narrator claims: "another mile ticked by, carrying her further from her life" (Bennett, 2020, 88). 'Her life' refers to her family but also to her passivity against the mockeries as a dark-skinned girl in Mallard. That life actually prevents her from agency so, geographically moving forward represents her desire to change her life and to leave Mallard. In this regard, Mallard can be perceived as a prison for Jude. While days are ticked by to count prisoners' time spent in prison, in Jude's case, miles are ticked by in order to measure the distance which separates her from her prison. It suggests a certain accomplishment in Jude's journey. The determiner 'another' reflects the progress in her journey toward Los Angeles and toward freedom. In this quote, the notion of progress through Jude's geographical movement is also emphasized by the personification of the 'mile,' which has the capacity to transport Jude and to make her escape from her life. Yet, despite that major progress in her journey, Jude is still in a passive position, because Jude is not the one who gets away from her life, but it is the personified 'mile' who does. Then, when she arrives in Los Angeles, she no longer lets the color of her skin be a constraint and even starts to have dreams. She indeed considers to get into medical school:

> You needed more than a good GPA to get into medical school. You had to compete against students who'd grown up in rich families, attended private schools, hired personal tutors. People who had been dreaming since kindergarten of becoming doctors. Who had family photos of themselves in tiny white coats, holding plastic stethoscopes to teddy bear bellies. Not people who grew up in nowhere towns, where there was one doctor you saw only when

> you were puking sick. Not people who'd stumbled into the whole idea of medical school after dissecting a sheep's heart in an anatomy class (Bennett, 2020, 218).

Despite her difference with the other applicants, Jude is ready to 'compete' against those students, who are probably white regarding the American historical context. Since Jude applied for medical school in 1982, the students she is referring to may have grown up in the 60s, during segregation and afterwards. That period was marked by huge economical inequalities between Black people and white people, therefore, African American students could not have grown up in rich families and afforded toys like "plastic stethoscopes," "teddy bears," and "tiny white coats." Moreover, the opposition between "people" and "not people" suggests that those white people are the good applicants for medical school, whereas Jude is not as the negation "not" reveals. Jude does not have the typical profile for medical school, so her application highlights her courage and her desire for agency: she seizes that opportunity even though her chances are inferior to the other applicants' ones. Nevertheless, despite her active position as an applicant, Jude also remains in a passive position: "seven schools were reading her application right now and would, in a few months, decide her future" (Bennett, 2020, 218). Even if Jude took the decision to apply, she still waits for an answer. Like the personified mile, the "seven schools" are also personified and have the capacity to "decide her future." Once again, Jude is not in an active position, she is not the one who makes the actions, even if she is the one who makes the decisions.

Finally, Jude ultimately gains agency and is active. When Jude encounters Kennedy in New York in 1985, Jude tells her cousin that she fulfilled her dream to get into medical school as she claims "I'm in medical school" (Bennett, 2020, 299). The fact that Jude is the one who tells that she is in medical school, in direct speech, gives her control over her own cue, which echoes the control she has over her own life. She applied for medical school years before this conversation between her and her cousin, and now, she uses her own voice to claim that she achieved her objective. Her success is also highlighted by the narrator who states that "Jude was living the life she said she wanted, years ago" (Bennett, 2020, 299). That quote reveals that Jude is the one who makes the action now, contrary to the structure of the other quotes which reflect the different stages of her journey. Jude is active because, not only is she the one who makes the action, but she also lives the life that she decided to live. The name 'Jude' as well as the double use of the pronoun 'she,' emphasize the fact that she is the one who controls her life. The association of those pronouns with the verbs "said" and "wanted" suggest that she planned her life, and now, she actually follows that plan. That quote also highlights the evolution in Jude's journey toward agency because that sentence refers to two time periods: the present and the past. The beginning of the sentence, in past continuous, formed by the association of "was" and "living," refers to Jude's present; she is currently living that life that she has desired for

years. The rest of the sentence refers to Jude's past, as the time marker "years ago" suggests. The part of the sentence which refers to her past corresponds to her objective, whereas the part which refers to her present corresponds to the achievement of that objective; that highlights her evolution from the passive dreamer to the active woman who fulfilled her dream.

Then, contrary to Tar Baby, Jude is mobile. In parallel to her spatial movement, Jude's passion is to run, the purpose of this activity is literally to move forward and to be performant. Jude is able to leave Mallard, to go to university, because she was the best runner of her team: "She was the fastest girl on the track team, and on another team in another town, she might have been captain" (Bennett, 2020, 93). Her status in the team is a consequence of colorism. In spite of being the best runner of the team, she is condemned to remain a regular member because of Mallard inhabitants' mentality. For the members of the team, Jude's skin color prevails over her level: she is talented but her skin is dark. The stress on the word 'another' proves that her dark skin represents an issue in Mallard specifically. The marginalization prevents her from progressing. She is incompatible with that town, because her skin color contrasts with its foundation and its values. Running actually represents the first step in Jude's journey to reach agency.

When she runs, it is like running away from Mallard, because this is how she managed to leave the town: "In the end, she rescued herself. She won a gold medal in the 400 meters at the state championship meet, and miracle of miracles, college recruiters saw her. She'd run as hard as she could now she was getting the hell out" (Bennett, 2020, 87). The use of the verb 'rescued' suggests that she was in a difficult position, which prevented her from living her life. Usually, when one is being rescued, one is in a passive position, because the rescuer is the one making the action. Yet, in Jude's case, she is both the one being rescued and the rescuer, she transitions from being passive to being active. Moreover, running makes Jude visible and exist in society as a talented athlete, and not only as 'the dark girl.' The last sentence of this quote highlights the fact that leaving Mallard is Jude's reward, and running is the way to obtain it. This talent reveals her determination to move forward and to live the way she intends to. Moreover, Reese is the only man who thinks that Jude's skin is beautiful, and is not a flaw. He treats her as a human being, compared to other men who treated her like a doll they could use whenever and wherever they wanted to; men did not want to be associated with Jude, whereas Reese is not ashamed of her.

Jude was hidden by other men: "she was the type of girl that boys only kissed in secret and, after, pretended that they hadn't" (Bennett, 2020, 125). Jude is deprived of her agency, as she suffers the men's will not to be seen with her, she is condemned to give way to that will. Even if she decided to reveal the truth about those secret kisses, nobody would believe her because she is the target of their mockery. Moreover, the fact that she is 'the type' also deprives her of her individuality, since

she is part of a community – her identity is erased by her belonging to a community. Additionally, the group 'boys' does the action of kissing, and Jude is the one who receives the kisses, which puts her in a passive position in the face of those boys. The boys also control information, as they decide to make it a secret.

Furthermore, rather than being the trickster figure, like Tar Baby, she actually becomes the one who reveals the tricks, as she reveals Stella's true identity to Kennedy.

Contrary to Stella Vignes, Clare Kendry proudly identifies herself as Black, despite the fact that she passes in Nella Larsen's *Passing.* Living that secret Black life actually makes her closer to the Black community than Irene is. The latter indeed acts Black, because that is what is expected from her as a Black woman, but she actually does not truly enjoy that life. On the contrary, Clare's adoration for that life is revealed by her desire to still be connected to that side of her ancestry, despite her ability to live fully as a white woman. The narrator claims that Irene and Clare are "strangers even in their racial consciousness" (Larsen, 1929,72). The use of the noun 'strangers' highlights the opposition between Irene and Clare regarding their racial identification. Clare is aware of being both white and Black, and actually tries to live while conciliating both of her races. In this novella, Clare also may be in a third place, because regarding her double racial heritage, she is able to live on both sides of the color line, as she is married to a white man and lives a white life. Yet, when he is away, she has the opportunity to have Black lovers and to attend Black events like the Negro Welfare League dance, or also the party at Felise's apartment at the end of the narrative. Like her ancestry, her life is double but the conciliation of both is actually impossible – a choice must be made.

Irene pretends to be Black and to love her life as a Black woman, but she actually envies Clare and her interbreeding. She envies the fact that Clare can live a white life and a Black life. In her article "Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," Jennifer DeVere Brody reveals that wrong interpretations of the narrative led to the misunderstanding of those characters. She also focuses on the actual racial belonging of Clare and Irene, and discusses the fact that race and class are linked in the construction of their identity. One of her main arguments is that Irene Redfield is not content with her life as a Black woman, and actually behaves white and has white ideologies:

> She expresses and embodies numerous stereotypical middle-class values. So much so, in fact, that she sounds exactly like Clare Kendry's white, Christian, spinster aunts who tell Clare that Noah "had cursed Ham and his sons for all time" (159). Clare's aunts view Negroes as either "charities or problems" (159). Irene is also guilty of treating African-Americans, not as individuals but as objects of her own ability to serve and have power over them (Brody, 1055).

Irene's hatred of African Americans is revealed by her resemblance with Clare's racist white aunts. Regarding Irene's race, she is not expected to adopt the same ideologies as Clare's racist aunts, their shared mindset is then paradoxical, and shows Irene's refusal to be limited by her Blackness. Throughout the novel, Irene tries to escape from her condition of Black woman by being in a position of control. In all the domains of her life she indeed takes the lead, as I will develop, and by doing so, she deconstructs the social inferiority of Black people. However, Irene does not act in favor of the Black community but in her own favor – she despises Black people and wants to climb socially.
The fact that Irene hires a Black maid illustrates this idea. Hierarchically, Irene is superior to Zulena, her maid, and by being able to give her orders, she reproduces a model of white domination to some extent. Yet, she is Black, and is occupying the dominant position of the white employer. She establishes a hierarchy among the Black community, which echoes the third place created by Alphonse Decuir, that positions light-skinned Black people as superior to dark-skinned Black people. That imitation of the white model also reveals a sort of frustration from Irene, who wishes to live like white people, but who is limited because of her ancestry. Because Irene cannot be white, she acts white.

When Irene is angry because Gertrude and Clare mock dark children, she is not angry at them because she is the mother of a dark child, rather she is angry because that is a reminder of her unattainable whiteness (39). Moreover, her envy for Clare's life leads her to try to surpass her. A rivalry exists between the two characters. While Clare progressively reconnects with her Black ancestry, Irene progressively stands on the white side of the race line. Jennifer DeVere Brody states that "at this point in the text, unorthodox alliances are drawn between the characters. Suddenly, Irene begins to side with Clare's white husband, John Bellew. If one believes that Clare and Brian Redfield are having an affair, then Irene's sympathy for John might be the result of their similar position as cuckolds" (Brody, 1062). The use of the adjective 'unorthodox' confirms that, the fact that Irene chooses John's side rather than Clare's is unexpected and goes against race solidarity. By designating her alliance with John as "unorthodox," the author suggests that Irene rejects her Blackness when she identifies with white people. Instead of privileging her ancestry, she rejects it. That alliance demonstrates that for Irene, status and class prevail over race, she sides with the wealthy white man even if he is a racist, rather than siding with her fellows, and especially with her Black female friend.

Irene's attitude in the novella makes her appear as a traditional Black person whereas she actually tries to establish a new way of being Black. She does not despise her Blackness but her inferior condition as a Black person. Her seeking for control, is a way to defy the Black condition, that is a way for her to go against the white construction of Blackness. In racial history, Black people are necessarily inferior to white people, so when Irene stands on the white side, she does not side with

a race, but with privileges, with a status and a class. She also goes against her racial heritage which condemned her to that place in society.

Like Irene, Clare also wants to have control, which contributes to the rivalry between the two protagonists, as Brody confirms when she writes that the whole narrative demonstrates "the manner in which these two figures struggle to attain and/or maintain power over each other in the text" (Brody, 1058). As a secret-keeper, Clare clearly controls others' knowledge, as she decides who gets to know her secret and who does not. When Clare goes to Irene at Drayton's, Clare implicitly chooses to share her secret with Irene. She also shares it with Gertrude and Brian, but hides it from her husband and the rest of society. Clare also has control over her race: she can be white and Black. However, Irene disturbs that control, because she shares Clare's secret with Hugh Wentworth, which interferes with Clare's acting during the Negro Welfare League dance. Through that revelation, Irene once again sides with white individuals, and defeats Clare as she reinforces her alliance with Hugh Wentworth.

A competition ends with a winner declared by judges. The readers may be the judges who can determine who wins that control competition between Irene and Clare when the latter dies. The scene when Clare dies marks the end of the competition since only Irene remains. However, the one who remains is not necessarily the winner, it depends on the readers' perspective. If Irene is believed to be the one who murdered Clare, she is the one who remains in control as she eliminates her opponent, but if Clare is believed to have committed suicide, she is the one who controls when and how she dies, especially since she reconnected with her Black self just before dying.

In Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," Blackness is reconstructed in a different way, and not solely by the author. The readers indeed construct Blackness with the elements given by Morrison and her narrator. For the readers, class, culture, marriage and political opinions all are factors defining race. Yet, the author's purpose is to make the readers reconsider their definition of race, while making them aware of their stereotypes and showing them that their way of constructing race presents contradictions.

In her novel, Brit Bennett extended the racial line while dividing the Black side of that line, a division which is not as explicit but still exists in Larsen's and Morrison's works. The latter writers' approach of race seems strictly binary: characters seem to be either white or Black. Bennett's novel creates an in-between through the locus of Mallard, where light-skinned Black people could never be perceived as white but do not want to be perceived as Black either. That in-between is reproduced in Irene Redfield's attitude, behavior, and opinions. She was born Black, is Black, but feels white. Her ancestry condemns her to remain Black, but her hatred of her race leads her to reproduce a model of white superiority, especially through her seeking for control and her alliances with white characters. In "Recitatif," since the readers are never given the answer to their race investigation, both Twyla and Roberta remain in an in-between, as they cannot be officially racially identified. Morrison's short

story is an experiment which aims at making the readers aware of their stereotypes and their wrong construction of race. Morrison purposefully includes stereotypes for each race in her narrative and creates paradoxes, as I developed in my previous subpart about racial fluidity. Intersectionality highlights the main characters' capacity to belong to both the white and the Black races in Morrison's short story "Recitatif," because of the elements of their respective lives which could correspond to both races. The readers' confusion provoked by Morrison's misleading and contradictory clues suggests that those readers misinterpret the characters' race; by doing so, they push the characters to cross the race line.

c) Pushing to cross the race line

In the three works, the characters' race is misinterpreted by others, and, for some, their own racial identification is confused or unknown. This is the consequence of a mistake made by the viewer, the character who looks at them, and who makes an interpretation of what they see and perceive. Those viewers' mistake actually reveals a limited construction of race, as they think that they are able to identify one's race based on physical appearance. Yet, as passing characters prove, some physical attributes can be more common in one race or another, without determining one's race. Against that misidentification, characters have a choice, between playing along or correcting that mistake; that is to say, between passing or not. The passing characters actually perpetuate that misidentification, as their ability to pass as white is possible because others perceive them as such, and that perception is even needed for the passing to be successful. The characters who accept that misidentification, including passing characters, can be perceived as racially passive. However, this passivity can paradoxically reveal some agency from the characters, because they actually go over the limits of their race when they cross the race line.

In Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half,* the characters adopt different reactions when others make them cross the race line. Stella Vignes started to pass as white when white characters themselves perceived her as such, but the fact that she played along is not a sign of passivity. On the contrary, it is a way to indirectly challenge whites' rules, and more specifically segregation rules. Stella indeed indirectly makes a fool of white people, as her first passing experience proves: "the shopgirl mistook her for white. 'Isn't it funny?' she said. 'White folks, so easy to fool! Just like everyone says'" (Bennett, 2020, 73). The use of the verb "mistook" confirms the shopgirl's mistake: she assigned a race to Stella which is not her actual one. She identified her as white because her physical appearance

is similar to the one of an actual white person, and the fact that Stella dared to enter that shop accessible to white people only during segregation, contributed to the shopgirl's wrong judgement; a Black girl is not expected in a whites' shop. That suggests that the context, and the environment can contribute to misidentifications. Moreover, Stella's reaction displays a certain superiority from her part regarding white people's naivety; that allows her to perceive passing as a game that she could easily win. Stella is in a position of superiority when she mocks white people: the exclamative highlights it, as it transcribes her haughty attitude. The comma after the noun 'folks' creates a rhythm which splits this exclamative into two parts and stresses each part. The comma suggests a short pause during which the expression 'white folks' is highlighted by a short silence, once it is pronounced by Stella. The second part of the exclamative is also framed by the comma and the exclamation mark, the frame emphasizes Stella's confidence regarding her capacities to deceive those white people. Stella's confidence is revealed by the adverb 'so' which increases the degree of easiness with which those 'white folks' can be misled. The exclamation mark transcribes the satisfaction Stella gets from deceiving them. That experience also confirms the rumors she has heard, and actually establishes it as a fact. As her commentary "just like everyone says" demonstrates, she indeed experiences whites' naivety by herself, which makes it real. In addition, the fact that Stella, from that single experience with only one white woman, makes it a generality shows that white people are all the same for her, and for the Mallard inhabitants as a whole. White people are all perceived as naive.

In this regard, passing characters are trickster figures; as such, they have power over the ones they trick, because they can manipulate them, make them believe what they want them to believe. While growing up, Stella still uses that ability to fool white characters, as she starts to pass permanently when she applies at Maison Blanche. The rhetorical questions "How was it her fault if they thought she was white when they hired her? What sense did it make to correct them now?" (Bennett, 2020, 65) are ironic. Stella already knew that they would mistake her for white, like the shopgirl did, and beyond the need for money, she applied because she knew that she had a chance, and she never intended to reveal her true identity, which makes those questions ironic. It is also a manipulation because Stella uses the fact that they make the mistake to justify the fact she is passing, while that is her actual wish. White characters are the ones who make her cross the race line, but Stella is the one who accepts it because she can access their privileges. That is the irony of the situation: white characters discriminate against Black characters, but, at the same time, without knowing it, those white characters favor Black characters. That contradiction exists because those white characters interpret Stella's race in accordance with their own racial characteristics. Once again, the environment contributes to the trick, because the name of the place actually suggests that only white people are expected there. During segregation, Black characters are not expected to apply in a company named 'Maison Blanche' where exclusively white people work. The name of the company

is also the French translation of the English 'White House,' that name then explicitly refers to whiteness as the adjective 'Blanche' suggests, as well as the reference to the White House which symbolized white power and privileges in the 1950s. Therefore, Stella's whiteness is confirmed by her application at 'Maison Blanche': an applicant at a white company, who looks white, is necessarily white; recruiters do not question her whiteness.

However, the misidentification by Black characters is not as advantageous as it is by white ones. During a time of racial tensions, after the murder of a Black Reverend, white characters are more despised than ever by Black characters. Not only are those Black characters furious, but they are also scared about their own future as Black people in a white-dominated society. Thus, in that context, when Desiree is perceived as white by a Black young man, the experience is much less pleasant than Stella's experiences, as the following passage reveals:

> On her walk home from the bus, a scared colored youth – scrawny as the baseball bat he was gripping – demanded her pocketbook.
> "Come on, you white bitch!" he screamed, slamming the bat against the pavement, as if he could drill to the center of the earth. She fumbled with her leather strap, too afraid to correct him, recognizing herself in his terror and fury, when Sam leapt in front of her, arms raised, and said, "This my woman, brother." The teen ran off into the din (Bennett, 2020, 27–28).

The description of the boy does not correspond to that of a criminal. He is indeed led by his fear and the comparison "scrawny as the baseball bat he was gripping," framed by the dashes may explain the reasons for his fear: his leanness suggests that he is poor and starving but he is helpless, as the bat he holds is not really threatening. Indeed, it is initially sport material and seems as harmless as the boy looks. Despite his harmless appearance, his attitude is paradoxically aggressive as he uses his bat as a tool aiming to threaten whom he thinks to be a white woman. The use of the verb 'gripping' highlights his fear, it seems that that object represents his only way to survive in that society, so if he drops it he is fully defenseless, which explains the firm hold. In addition, the bat can also refer to the idiom 'as blind as a bat: that boy is blind about Desiree's race, he does not see that she is Black, and that they belong to the same community. His hostility is the result of his blindness – he makes a mistake because he cannot see what is right in front of him. Moreover, the insult "white bitch" also contrasts with his appearance, because that boy does not seem to correspond to the stereotype of the rude and violent Black man, he just acts rude and violent because he is scared and wants to hide it. That insult also reveals the object of his hatred. The exclamation mark transcribes his anger, as he is screaming at her. Desiree's passivity against that misidentification is not a way to trick the other, or to access white privileges, because in this situation, being white represents a disadvantage, and even a danger. Her passivity is actually her response to the verbal violence and her reaction to the encounter

with someone she identifies with; Desiree indeed recognizes herself in that boy. That interaction allows her to get an outside perspective of the Black figure in a white-dominated society. She experiences Blacks' hatred as she is positioned as the white figure in that context. Yet paradoxically, that misadventure also brings her closer to the African American community, for that boy functions as her reflection in the mirror. They share the same worries and fears, which creates a sense of racial connection. Sam's intervention reestablishes the truth, he corrects the boy's mistake and identifies Desiree as a Black woman. Their relationship is indeed a proof of her Black identity, as an interracial relationship is unconceivable in a racialized society. The boy's reaction proves that he understood his mistake. Stella's experiences of passing prove that being white in the eyes of white characters is a privilege, whereas Desiree's experience proves that being white in the eyes of Black characters is dangerous and makes her become a menace.

Then, in the narrative, white characters can be perceived as Black. That is the case for Kennedy, who is perceived as Black by Jude now that the latter knows that they are cousins, and that Kennedy's mother is actually Black. During their conversation about Mallard, Jude describes the town to Kennedy and tells her about the inhabitants' characteristics. She claims that "'they only like light Negroes out there. You'd fit right in.' She'd said it so offhandedly that Kennedy almost didn't realize it. 'I'm not a Negro,' she said" (Bennett, 2020, 314). When she tells Kennedy that she corresponds to Mallard's criteria, and suggests that Kennedy has her place in that town, Jude identifies Kennedy as a "light Negro." Contrary to Stella and Desiree, Kennedy corrects the misidentification. However, Jude's interpretation is not established by what she sees but by what she knows. Their blood relation indeed leads Jude to identify Kennedy as a Black woman, because a part of Kennedy's ancestry is Black. Nevertheless, by stating that she is not Black, Kennedy denies that part and corrects Jude's interpretation. That intervention seems to reestablish Kennedy's truth, but from a biological perspective it also makes her pass as white. The debate over Kennedy's race continues:

> "Well, your mother is," she said.
>
> "So?"
>
> "So that makes you one too."
>
> "It doesn't make me anything," she said. "My father's white, you know. And you don't get to show up and tell me what I am."
>
> It wasn't a race thing. She just hated the idea of anyone telling her who she had to be. She was like her mother in that way. If she'd been born Black, she would have been perfectly happy about it. But she wasn't and who was Jude to tell her that she was somebody that she was not? Nothing had changed, really. She'd learned one thing about her mother, but what did that amount to when you looked at the totality of her life? A single detail had

> been moved and replaced. Swapping out one brick wouldn't change a house into a fire station. She was still herself. Nothing had changed. Nothing had changed at all (Bennett, 2020, 314–315).

In that debate, genealogy occupies a different position in one's racial identity. Jude indeed perceives Kennedy as Black because Kennedy's mother is, whereas Kennedy considers that her mother's race does not determine hers. She limits her race to a part of her ancestry, and to the one assigned to her at birth. Through the contradictions in Kennedy's argument, the latter debunks her own argument as she thinks that ancestry does not construct her race. However, she uses her paternal ancestry only to construct her white race. That paradox confirms her racial denial. The fact that she brings up her father's race to prove that she is not Black, and that her mother's race does not make her "anything" also implies that Kennedy is not aware that she is a mixed woman.

Moreover, she is paradoxical because she pretends to have agency in terms of race. She considers that she is the only one who has control over her racial identity. Nevertheless, she actually identifies as white because that is what she has been told all her life, and she has always lived as such, with the privileges it granted her. However, Kennedy's cue shows that for her, cultural and societal elements determine her race, as the metaphor "swapping out one brick wouldn't change a house into a fire station" implies. The edifice would be slightly different, for the original structure would be modified. However, the difference would be minimal just like Kennedy's racial identity, as she was confident about it all her life. Yet, after she found out about her real genealogy, and even if she claims that nothing has changed for her, she still transitioned from a white woman to a woman with a mixed racial heritage, who identifies as white. For her however, those revelations cannot make her reconsider her whole racial background. The anaphoric gradation "nothing had changed, really […] Nothing had changed. Nothing had changed at all" shows Kennedy's attempt to convince herself that her racial identification remains unchanged. The comma positioned before the adverb 'really' suggests a short pause which transcribes her hesitation. The adverb 'really' reinforces the idea of hesitation, for it contrasts with the affirmation "nothing had changed." The repetition of that affirmation without the adverb reveals her confidence regarding her racial identification; it is reinforced by the repetition of that same affirmation with the addition of the adverbial phrase 'at all,' which confirms the fact that she still identifies as white despite the discovery of her mother's ancestry. It also emphasizes her rejection of her Black ancestry.

Despite the fact that Kennedy fully identifies as white, the agency that Kennedy believes to have over her racial identity is superficial. The latter has indeed always perceived herself as white, because that is what her mother made her believe while passing as white herself. Stella's passing has

impacted Kennedy's race; thus, the mother has always been the one to have control over the daughter's race. Stella is the one who took the decision to conceal her Black race and to identify as white, so she is the one who made Kennedy think that her maternal ancestry was also fully white. While Kennedy thought that she was active in her racial identity, she was actually passive, and her mother was actually the active character. In her work entitled *The Spectacle of the Secret,* Arielle Meyer discusses the complexity of secrets and demonstrates that different ways of keeping a secret exist. She states:

> The secret keeper, who plays a role, is also an addressee of their own comedy, that is to say a spectator. A circularity proper to role playing would exist. The secret keeper plays a role which produces effects on the character who faces them. That character becomes an actor themselves, an actor without being aware of it. Through a reversal effect, the secret keeper of the comedy, while keeping acting up, also occupies the position of a spectator, a spectator of the effects produced by their own acting.[4]

When Stella plays the role of a white woman and hides her true racial background to everyone, Stella implicitly pushes Kennedy to play the same role as her, but unconsciously. Stella's lies have impacted Kennedy's whole life and race, as the latter has also perpetuated those lies but once again, unconsciously. In this regard, Kennedy also passes as white without being aware of it, when she does not know about her mother's secret. Yet, in the dialogue between Jude and Kennedy, once the latter acknowledges her mother's passing, Kennedy claims to be white, which means that she still passes as white. Nonetheless, she does not appear to be aware of it when she rejects her Black heritage.

In Larsen's *Passing*, the passing characters, like Stella, are mistaken for white but play along that misidentification, as it benefits them in a segregated society. When Clare's husband – John Bellew – meets Irene and Gertrude, he immediately perceives them as white because of their physical appearance, their friendship with his wife, and the fact that they stand in his house, a racist white man's house. When John Bellew is asked if he knew any Black person he replies: "Thank the Lord, no! And never expect to!" (Larsen, 1929, 44). The irony of the situation is at its peak, for Bellew claims that he has never known Black people while being surrounded by three of them and not being aware of it. His answer proves that he identifies Irene and Gertrude as white and has no clue about their actual race. John Bellew's mistake regarding his guests' identification ridicules him, and his answer to the question reinforces that. He indeed answers that he does not know Black people, and

[4] My translation of « Le détenteur du secret, qui joue un rôle, est également destinataire de sa propre comédie, c'est-à-dire spectateur. Il y aurait une circularité propre aux jeux de rôle. Le détenteur du secret joue un rôle qui produit des effets sur le personnage qui lui fait face. Ce personnage devient lui-même un comédien, un comédien sans le savoir. Par un effet de retournement, le détenteur du secret de la comédie, tout en continuant à jouer son rôle, occupe également la place de spectateur, spectateur des effets produits par son propre jeu. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret,* p. 61.

his negative answer is framed by a comma and an exclamation mark. The irony is perceived by his audience and the readers only, thus, when his negative answer is emphasized by the frame, it allows him to express what he thinks to be the truth. Yet, for the three women and the readers, that emphasis on his answer reinforces the comic effect and contributes to make fun of him. Paradoxically, Bellew is the only one who does not understand the irony of his answer, because he does not possess the same knowledge as these women and the readers. In that situation, Black people are actually positioned as superior to the white man, because they are the sole characters in that scene to know about the comic situation, and John is a minority. That is actually ironic, because he is married to a Black woman and is saying that to Black women. The fact that he develops his answer while adding that he does not plan, and does not want to ever meet Black people, makes him appear even more ridiculous. Like Stella, Clare and her guests play along John's mistake to protect Clare's secret and to protect themselves too, as John's hatred of Black people could lead to a dangerous situation.

Moreover, the image of the naive white character established in Bennett's novel is also found in this narrative. That comic interaction confirms Stella's words when she claims that white people are so easy to fool. Bellew's ridiculous position is maintained from that passage until his discovery of Clare's real race. In that scene, he repeats "I know you're no nigger. […] I know you're no nigger" (Larsen, 1929, 43). The repetition stresses his confidence regarding Clare's whiteness; he pretends to possess a knowledge that those three women and the readers know he does not possess. His confidence makes him appear as a fool, his perception is wrong. Those words echo and actually contrast with the exclamative "so you're a nigger, a damn dirty nigger!" (Larsen, 1929, 136) that he pronounces when he confronts Clare after he found out about her secret. This time, the repetition does not display his confidence but his anger, the gradation acts as a way for him to express his realization, and is reinforced by the short pause implied by the comma, which may transcribe his time to process those words. It expresses his disgust as well, as the adjective 'dirty' implies. The exclamation mark transcribes his fury. Since a parallel can be drawn between those two interventions, the exclamative "so you're a nigger, a damn dirty nigger!" can also act as a rectification, John is correcting his own mistake and contradicts himself. The conjunction "so" implies a conclusion, his conclusion proves that he was wrong, and he contradicts his earlier affirmations.

In the introduction to his work *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, Werner Sollors states that "whether the interracial character is proved white or Black, in either case the 'mixed race' space is cleared in favor of a monoracial occupancy" (Sollors, 6). This quote applies to both Kennedy and Clare, for half of their racial heritage disappears. They are put in the Black category only. Those characters live in societies where race is necessarily binary, one is either Black or white, so when their passing comes to an end, other characters identify them as solely Black. That identification actually imitates the way of passing as white, that is to say to conceal

the half, or a part of one's ancestry, and to make the one which is not hidden the only one. The characters who identify them as Black, indirectly and unconsciously make them pass as Black this time, because they erase the passing characters' white ancestry. Sollors' argument leads to reexamine the moment when one finds out about one's passing: they do not find out about the character's true race, but actually find out about the character's mixed race. However, one's Black ancestry prevails over their white ancestry, so all characters who are not fully white are necessarily Black, like Clare who is designated as a "nigger" despite her mixed heritage. That corresponds to the 'One Drop rule.'

In his article "The One Drop Rule & the One Hate Rule," David A. Hollinger discusses and criticizes the oversimplification of race through the two major racial practices in the United States: The One Drop rule and the One Hate rule. The author claims that "this 'one drop rule' has meant that anyone with a visually discernable trace of African, or what used to be called 'Negro,' ancestry is, simply, Black" (Hollinger, 18). When John calls Clare a "nigger," he follows the One Drop rule, because for him, Clare's African American heritage prevails over her white heritage. However, the fact that John follows that rule is paradoxical, for he has always perceived Clare as a white woman, but when he finds out about her African American ancestry, he suddenly sees her as Black even though her Black heritage is not "visually discernable." By calling Clare a "nigger," John deprives Clare of her agency, for he deprives her of the advantageous white part of her ancestry: Clare's mixed heritage is a privilege because she can be both Black and white. Clare can live a privileged white life while reconnecting with her Black self. Nevertheless, when John identifies her as a fully Black woman, Clare is no longer a Black woman who lives a white privileged life, she just becomes a Black woman who suffers racism. Not only is that rule followed by white people, but also by Black characters, like Jude in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half.* By stating that Kennedy is Black because the latter's mother is Black[5], Jude follows the principle of the One Drop rule. Even if Kennedy does not identify herself as Black and does not look Black at all, Jude perceives her as such because Kennedy has African American blood. Since Kennedy's mother, Stella, is not fully Black herself, as her ancestors are of mixed heritage, Kennedy's African American ancestry constitutes only a small portion of her genealogy. Therefore, Jude's statement is influenced by the One Drop rule. The conversation between Jude and Kennedy is actually an implicit debate about that rule: Jude agrees with that rule whereas Kennedy rejects it. Jude thinks that the small portion of African American blood in Kennedy's ancestry automatically makes her Black, whereas Kennedy thinks that her white ancestry as well as her white education prevail. When Kennedy contradicts Jude, Kennedy reverses the idea that one's Black ancestry prevails over one's white ancestry, as she claims that despite her Black ancestry, she

[5] See p.37 of that thesis.

is fully white. Nevertheless, even if she rejects that idea, she does not bring out her mixed heritage: one side still prevails over the other.

In “Recitatif,” Maggie, the character whose racial identity is debated over, does not have the opportunity to choose between passing or correcting the mistake made by the other characters about her race. Maggie is silenced, which makes her completely passive.

The readers know that either Twyla or Roberta is Black or white, but for Maggie it is different, because the only description of her skin color is the adjective ‘sand-colored.’ That adjective could designate either a white character or a light-skinned Black character. Since Twyla and Roberta cannot agree on her race, Maggie remains in a racial in-between. She cannot be perceived as white for Roberta, but cannot be perceived as Black for Twyla. Maggie’s character proves that perspective can lead to misinterpretations, and one’s perspective can make some characters cross the race line.

The readers also try to interpret Maggie’s race, and take part in that debate. Roberta’s and Twyla’s debate actually represents the debate taking place among the readers: Roberta represents the readers who think that Maggie is Black and Twyla represents the readers who perceived her as white throughout their reading. Actually, Twyla does not state that she identified Maggie as white, but the fact that she contradicts Roberta implies that idea. Twyla indeed asks herself: “What was she saying? Black? Maggie wasn’t Black” (Morrison, 1983, 32). The succession of rhetorical questions reveals her confusion regarding Roberta’s argument. Maggie’s Black race is questioned and doubted as the adjective “Black” followed by a question mark shows. That highlights Twyla’s state of confusion, but despite her surprise, the latter is able to contradict Roberta with the negative structure associated with her friend’s argument: “Maggie wasn’t Black”. Those two characters and the readers determine Maggie’s race with the elements which, according to them, construct race. Elizabeth Abel explains:

> To underscore the cultural specificity of these codes, Morrison writes into the text a figure of racial undecidability: Maggie, the mute kitchen worker at St. Bonaventure, who occasions the text’s only mention of skin color, an explicitly ambiguous sandy color, and who walks through the text with her little kid’s hat and her bowed legs “like parentheses,” her silent self a blank parenthesis, a floating signifier (Abel, 472).

Maggie’s role in the narrative is to be ambiguous because, contrary to Roberta and Twyla, her race is completely unknown. This specificity enhances her passivity but also her objectification, for this character is an object of race. Maggie is indeed silenced, she literally has no voice and her character exists only through the narrator and the other characters’ gaze and memories. However, Roberta and Twyla classified Maggie in one of their race categories but from a child’s perspective. Through that,

Morrison demonstrates that racial codes are determined since childhood, and are also culturally influenced, which explains the characters' debate, as one comes from a white context and the other from a Black one. The memories which feed the debate reveal the children's perspectives, and reflect their cultural background. The narrator Twyla claims that "Maggie couldn't talk. The kids said she had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born that way: mute" (Morrison, 1983, 7). Those other kids, including Roberta, may think that Maggie is Black, which explains why they think that her silence is the result of violent acts. Culturally, they may associate violence and suppressed voices with African Americans. Yet, Twyla's hypothesis contradicts their idea. Moreover, if Maggie is Black, she is a figure of Black suffering and helplessness, because her physical disability and her silence make her vulnerable, and force her to suffer in silence.

While Stella and Desiree are perceived as white because of their physical characteristics, which correspond more to white characters' appearance, Maggie's sand color is interpreted as Black because of her low social status and her silence.

Moreover, Maggie's actual race may not be the reason for their attack. That character may embody, or be the object of these children's hatred. In the fragile, silent character with no identity, those children may have perceived the object of their frustrations caused by society. However, their frustrations could not be alleviated because their status of orphans, and for most of them, orphans from minorities, were condemned in society. In Twyla's and Roberta's cases, their respective mothers' condition and behavior seem to reflect their low status in society, which impacts Twyla and Roberta. For one of the main characters, race may be the reason for that marginalization. As margins, all St. Bonny's children are powerless in society, and because they no longer fit in it, they have been moved to St. Bonaventure. Nonetheless, their marginalization appears to be their strength. St. Bonaventure indeed seems to be a copy of society, to reproduce the hierarchical model, and the power relations but in an uncivilized and limitless way: "they [the big girls] knocked her [Maggie] down. Those girls pushed her down and tore her clothes" (Morrison, 1983, 25). Society rules do not seem to apply there, like segregation. Children attack someone - more specifically an old woman - and remain unpunished. In this regard, that orphanage is a sort of society in itself, where margins have power and where Maggie represents the oppressions that the children have experienced. Attacking her is a way to reject those oppressions which are probably mostly racial, because many minorities are present there, for "all kinds of kids were in there, Black ones, white ones, even two Koreans" (Morrison, 1983, 6) as well as "New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians" (Morrison, 1983, 5). It is also a way to take control over them.

Sandra Kumamoto Stanley studies Maggie's characteristics, which contribute to her image and symbolism in her article entitled "Maggie in Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif': The Africanist Presence

and Disability Studies." The author of the article highlights the fact that "critics focusing on Twyla and Roberta either cursorily analyze Maggie's role or interpret it in metaphoric relation to the two main characters. In such readings, Maggie is most commonly associated with representations of silence and absence, or, as Twyla and Roberta observe, with their failed mothers" (Stanley, 71–72). Indirectly, the way Maggie is perceived by Roberta and Twyla may indicate what their actual race is, because Maggie may be, for them, the figure of their respective mothers. Roberta may have perceived Maggie as Black because her own mother and herself are Black, and her mother's illness may represent her Blackness in that segregated society. Twyla may have perceived her as white because she and her mother are white, and as a poor and single white mother she may be an outcast, which would lead her to dance all day. The girls may despise their respective conditions and mothers, who, because of their conditions, abandoned their own daughters to a place dedicated to children with no parents. Twyla's mother is too irresponsible to take care of a child, and Roberta's mother is too sick to do so. They may be victims of society. As a consequence, Twyla and Roberta may associate their mothers' condition and behavior with their race. Because the main characters perceive Maggie in the same race as their respective mothers, attacking her was probably a way to exteriorize and express their hatred of them, as well as their hatred of their mothers' race. The idea that Maggie may be the embodiment of the characters' mothers is shown by the parallel drawn between Maggie's attack and the coming of the mothers: "I think it was the day before Maggie fell down that we found out our mothers were coming to visit us on the same Sunday. We had been at the shelter twenty-eight days (Roberta twenty-eight and a half) and this was their first visit with us" (Morrison, 1983, 9). The parallel between the two events suggests that the two are linked and even have a causal relation. The fact that Twyla and Roberta found out about their mothers' visit precedes Maggie's assault suggests that her attack may be the consequence of that visit. Furthermore, if Roberta is the Black character, her violence against Maggie may also be the desire to reject African Americans' vulnerability, as Stanley suggests when she states that "Morrison's narrative invites an exploration of the intersecting identity markers associated with disability and race, as well as a critique of social processes and practices that shape the narrative" (Stanley, 72). Maggie's vulnerability as a disabled kitchen woman indeed positions her at the bottom of St. Bonny's society, and echoes African Americans' vulnerability in the segregated society; her disability would be the metaphor for African Americans' helplessness.

Through the characters' observation, and memories of Maggie, the latter is distanced from the narrative. She is indeed not present as a character but is through memories. The readers have access to Twyla's perception of Maggie, as well as Roberta's, and both differ: they construct Maggie in the way they remember her. In this regard, Maggie's race remains ambiguous and unfixed. She has no

control over it because her race is defined through the main characters' perspective only. Maggie's undetermined race is the result of her objectification; her roles in the narrative are solely to represent and embody, but not to exist as a character. She is meant to represent a position in society, societal oppressions, and embody deceiving characters – like the girls' deceiving mothers. Her vulnerability as a disabled and an old woman is interpreted as a metaphor in order to read her race.

Through that silenced and disabled character, race is represented as being unclear and fragile, when one identifies someone's race only based on physical characteristics. It also shows that racial identification is ridiculously essential for characters in their identification of others, because Maggie's description focuses on her skin color and her disability but none of the children question her identity, or her personality. The narrator indeed claims "I don't know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked" (Morrison, 1983, 7). Twyla only shares her ignorance of Maggie's personality, but never expresses regrets. The shortness of the first sentence, compared with the second one, which is developed, as the conjunction "and" shows, echoes the unimportance that Maggie's personality had for Twyla and the other characters. The negative structure of the first sentence contrasts with the adverb "just" in the second sentence, which suggests the unconscious selection of her memories, and her knowledge about Maggie. It proves that only Maggie's status led the girls to attack her, and not her personality. Moreover, the comparison between her legs and parentheses reinforces Maggie's image as a margin, for parentheses are usually used in a text to bring clarifications, or to add a detail which may not be as important as the rest of the text. Through that image, that character is represented as a sub-character, whose reading is intricate, which makes her interpretation unclear. Her way of walking completes the idea of unclear interpretation, since her rocking reveals her unstable identity because of the characters and the readers' debate. Furthermore, none of them ever questioned Maggie about her race. While maintaining the uncertainty about Maggie's race, the other characters also maintain control over Maggie's identity, which silences her twice: once by Morrison who made her mute, and then by the narrator, the other characters as well as the readers who control her identity.

Finally, Maggie's objectification can be compared with the objectification of a doll. While a doll reflects the imagination of the child playing with it, Maggie is also subject to the imagination of the children who attack her. Maggie has a cathartic role for the characters, but also for the readers who can perceive Maggie as their own object of hatred, since Morrison invites her readers to actively engage with the narrative.

Once again, characters in Bennett's and Larsen's works are clearly racially identified, whether they are assigned the right or the wrong race; but in Morrison' s work, the readers cannot know if

Roberta is right or if Twyla is, Maggie's race remains ambiguous. However, despite those discrepancies, all those characters' races are misinterpreted because the other characters' construction of race is based on stereotypes, or associated with an environment, and a condition. Nevertheless, the racial navigation is not possible solely due to those characters' ambiguous physical appearance, and the way the other characters interpret that appearance. The navigation is possible because the passing characters are performers. They perform a fake identity in order to pass as white.

2) Passing as a Performance in Bennett's The Vanishing Half

In order to successfully pass as white, the passing characters need to perform a fake identity. The purpose of a performance is to create a convincing and a realistic representation of a character for an audience who is conscious, or not, to be part of a performance. The performer is the one who initiates and creates the performance, as suggested by the etymology of the word. The noun 'performance' indeed comes from the Old French 'parformance,' which signifies 'accomplishment,' the verb 'parformer' means 'to carry out.' Moreover, the word is composed of 'par' which is the French for 'through,' and of 'former' which means 'to shape.' The analysis of the word stresses the process of creation for the performance of a character. The etymology of the word 'performance' implies that it requires acting skills in order to be convincing and successful.

a) Using Language to Perform Identity

For the success of a performance, the performer puts on a metaphorical mask to hide their true identity; by performing another identity – by playing a role, they become hypocrites. The etymology of the word comes from the Greek "hypokrites," which means "an actor" and a "stage player." Ancient Greek theater actors were called hypocrites; they wore big masks which covered their whole face in order to shed light on the character they were playing, and to hide the actor – the identity of the actor.[6] When Stella and Clare pass, they cover their true identity through their performance.

[6] Merriam Webster Dictionary, Discovering the Meaning and Origin of 'Hypocrite' | Merriam-Webster.

Passing and Duality

In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, Stella and Kennedy perform white characters, whereas Barry performs a woman, Bianca.

Stella is an actor; her flawless performance is the result of her observations of white characters. She created her white self: that idea is confirmed by the narrator who claims that "she had created herself. Since the morning she'd walked out of the Maison Blanche building a white girl" (Bennett, 2020, 180). The narrator insists on the fact that Stella's white identity is artificial, through the verbs "created" and "building" which suggest that Stella plays a role. Before she passes as white, she speaks African American Vernacular English, which contributes to her Blackness and stresses her belonging to the African American working-class: "AAVE is a variety of English which is primarily spoken by working and middle class African Americans" (Siemes, 153). In her article entitled "Defying the Binaries of Passing in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*," Maaike Siemes studies the different racial identifications of the Vignes twins, and how Stella manages to perform a white character: "As Frantz Fanon has argued, speech can 'measure' how people culturally adapt: by speaking a language, one adopts a culture. At the beginning of the novel, Stella speaks AAVE" (Siemes, 153). The author focuses on the twins' conversation about their job at Dixie Laundry and analyzes their accent: "I don't care how many toilets I got to jump in […] I ain't goin back to Mallard" (Bennett, 2020, 60). Siemes identifies the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features in their dialogue:

> Apart from using the word ain't (here for "am not"), which is a typical feature of AAVE, Stella pronounces the word going not with a velar nasal at the end, but with an alveolar nasal (like in the word nasal itself). This is frequent in AAVE, and in almost all Southern American English varieties, and is known as g-dropping because the final g is not written to represent this change (although no actual sound is dropped in the pronunciation). In addition, Stella leaves out the auxiliary verb have in "I got to jump in." She also leaves out the copula in "White folks, so easy to fool!" These are also common features in AAVE (Siemes, 153).

In Stella's transition from a Black to a white woman, language occupies an important place, as it contributes to the performance of her identity. Since language reflects both class and race, Stella's use of General American English elevates her to the status of a white upper-class woman. Language becomes a tool in constructing her white identity. Her physical appearance is racially ambiguous,

as previously discussed, since Stella can be perceived as either white or Black depending on the context and her demeanor. However, when she fully commits to passing, language shifts her firmly to the white side of the race line, enabling her to align her physicality with her new identity.

Stella's use of the AAVE indeed highlights her African American heritage, and shows her belonging to the African American community. Language is one way to express and construct race. That idea is developed by the author of the article "Language and Identity Construction: The Case of a Refugee Digital Bricoleur," Fares J. Karam, since he states that "through language, identity is constructed in a discoursal manner by address (how others talk to us) […] and affiliation (how we talk like others; Ivanic, 2006)" (Karam, 512). The way one speaks reveals their racial identification, as well as their social standing. However, it is also confirmed by others through the way they interact with one. People address others according to the way they perceive them. If one speaks with a co-speaker in their mother tongue, and without adapting their way of speaking, it demonstrates that the speaker identifies their co-enunciator as their fellow, because language is meant for mutual understanding. In this regard, when Desiree addresses Stella in AAVE, she identifies her sister as a fellow African American woman. For instance, Desiree uses AAVE in "you talk different now" (Bennett, 2020, 340), as she uses the adjective "different" instead of an adverb. The structure of AAVE is also found in Desiree's sentence: "she said she seen you" (Bennett, 2020, 341). Once again, the auxiliary is left out which is a common feature of AAVE. When Desiree addresses her twin sister in AAVE, she implies that the latter will understand her because she belongs to the African American community like her. However, Stella is not receptive to that dialect and answers in General American English (GAE).

Stella's use of GAE reveals that she no longer identifies as a Black woman, and that beyond embodying a white woman, she chooses to remain white. She is indeed able to speak her mother tongue, but she chooses to speak in GAE, as Desiree points out. The twin sisters talk differently and Desiree highlights it in their dialogue: "'You talk different now,' Desiree said. 'What do you mean?' Stella said. 'Like that. Wut do you mean. How'd you learn to talk like that?'" (Bennett, 2020, 340). Stella's question reflects her confusion regarding Desiree's remark; she does not seem to be aware of her language shift, which suggests that, for her, she has always been white. Despite her decision to leave Mallard and to live like a white woman, Stella's question shows that she herself is not aware of the rupture with the African American community and Mallard inhabitants

that Desiree's first intervention highlights. She has been acting white for so long that now, she no longer acts; her question shows that she is not even conscious of her evolution, she seems to have forgotten that she used to speak AAVE before passing. Moreover, Desiree's failed imitation of Stella emphasizes the fact that GAE is unfamiliar and not natural to Mallard inhabitants. Her question "How'd you learn to talk like that?" implicitly justifies the failure of her imitation, for Desiree is impressed by Stella's capacity to master a language Mallard inhabitants do not get to know because they are not in contact with white people. The interrogative word "how" questions Stella's manner by which she learned GAE, which suggests that its learning is not accessible in Mallard, and highlights how unfamiliar Mallard inhabitants are with that dialect.

Stella's answer to that question actually confirms the idea that Mallard inhabitants cannot have access to knowledge about GAE: "'Television' […] 'I used to watch hours of it. Just to learn how to sound like them'" (Bennett, 2020, 340). The time spent watching the television demonstrates that her capacity to sound like a white woman is the result of long hours of work to remediate to her total inexperience of GAE. By choosing to keep speaking GAE, even in Mallard with her Black sister, Stella implicitly rejects her Black heritage once again and marks the twins' different racial identities: Desiree remains Black whereas Stella is definitively white. That rejection of her Black heritage through language is reinforced by her second abandonment of her twin sister Desiree. In order to be entirely white, Stella needs to completely leave her Black life behind her. Stella comes to her hometown and interacts with her Black family as a white woman, despite the fact that she disguises as a Mallard inhabitant.

Stella indeed disguises as her Mallard younger self: "One simple bag, her wedding ring tucked inside. Wore her cheapest slacks, pinned her hair back like she used to, although now it was beginning to streak with gray" (Bennett, 2020, 324). Stella temporarily transforms back into her younger self, through what appears to be a disguise. That look indeed contrasts with the upper-class white Stella Sanders. For the disguise to be efficient, Stella even removes her wedding ring, as it belongs to the white Stella – when she used to be the Mallard Stella, she was not married. Stella is mindful of the details of her disguise. Not only does her disguise transform Stella into the Mallard version of herself, but it also signifies her descent in social classes. The adjective "cheap," in its superlative form "cheapest," indicates that Stella embodies the lower-class version of herself, and the superlative emphasizes the Mallard Stella's low economic situation. Stella's reenactment

of her past hairstyle, and the semi-modal verb phrase "used to," which implies a past habit, demonstrate that Stella intends to embody her younger self. The realization of that hairstyle may also reflect Mallard Stella's low economic situation, as it appears to be a practical hairstyle for a cleaning lady, as she was. Nevertheless, despite her efforts, her gray hair makes the accurate reenactment of her younger version impossible, for it shows that time passed, and that she no longer is the person she attempts to look like.

However, the hypothesis about her total belonging to the white race is questioned by the use of the pronoun 'them' in "just to learn how to sound like them" (340). Despite the rejection of her Blackness and her desire to keep living like a white woman, the use of the pronoun 'them,' which designates white people, contradicts her actions. By othering white people, she excludes herself from that community and indirectly positions herself as a Black woman. That othering echoes her comment "white folks, so easy to fool!" (73), about white people's naivety at the beginning of the narrative after she passes for the first time. When young Stella says that, she also otherizes white people and excludes herself from that community. However, when young Stella makes that statement at the beginning of the narrative, she is still Black, which suggests that when passing Stella calls white people 'them,' she actually tries to imitate and perform her Black young self. Therefore, Stella's performances are a succession of imitations, and the construction of her white character relies on imitations and mimicry. The use of the television as a tool to learn how to be white, suggests that it taught her how to sound white, as she says, and how to look white in terms of attitude and clothes.

b) Gradation in the Passing Performance: Playing the Racist Woman

Stella has been performing her white character for so long, and so convincingly, that it may have become more than a character – she may have become white. That hypothesis is ventured by Desiree at the beginning of the novel, and confirms itself throughout the narrative: “But for all Desiree knew, Stella had lived white for half her life now, and maybe acting for that long ceased to be acting altogether. Maybe pretending to be white eventually made it so” (Bennett, 2020, 74). According to Desiree, Stella learned to be white through her long practice. Moreover, the fact that Stella has been acting white for half her life, suggests that she is able to play her white character as naturally as she was Black. Since the time Stella spent acting white is equal to the time she spent actually being Black; Stella may now be as white as she once was Black. That quote also suggests that for Stella, the line between acting white and being white is blurred: the verb “ceased” implies a rupture between acting and reality. Even if Stella is aware not to be really white, she plays a white woman, a white wife, and a white mother anyway. She lives like white people; it becomes more natural for her to act white through time. The narrator indeed implies that Stella becomes white through time: “She wanted Desiree to see how convincingly she played her role, but she was living a performance where there could be no audience” (Bennett, 2020, 197). There is a contrast between her convincing acting and the fact that she lives her performance. Her acting skills allow her to convince others that she is white, but when the narrator claims that Stella lives her performance, this suggests that the latter also convinces herself that she can be white. The impossibility for Desiree to attend Stella’s performance shows the incompatibility between Desiree and Stella’s new life, and then foreshadows Stella’s departure. When the noun “performance” is associated with the verb “give,” it implies that the performer performs for an audience, but in this sentence, “performance” is associated with the verb “live.” This association intertwines acting and reality, it makes the performance become the performer’s reality. Thus, when the narrator claims that Stella lives her performance, the narrator also claims that she becomes the character that she performs. Nevertheless, Stella’s fear to be unmasked prevents her from fully turning into her white character, because it is a constant reminder that she is actually Black, and that she is only pretending to be someone else.

Furthermore, Stella manages to play a racist white woman in order to protect her secret. She stays away from Black people because they represent a threat to her passing. As mentioned at the beginning of this part, Stella "was living a performance where there could be no audience" (197). The audience which cannot attend that performance is actually the Black audience, as they could recognize that she is not truly white. When Stella finds out that an African American family is about to move in the neighborhood, she fears being unmasked by the family, like the Black guard who unmasked her when she was passing at the museum (157). Stella has always remained discreet and taciturn in order to reduce the likelihood of being unmasked. Yet the moving of the Black family into the neighborhood represents a greater threat for Stella's secret.

Therefore, she leaves the role of the quiet woman, and plays the role of the angry racist white woman in an effort to eliminate the perceived danger. In his article "Self-Reinvention in *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett," Guy Rolland Akre studies the racism present within the Black community, rooted in trauma caused by America's racial history. The author also examines how, due to the trauma inflicted by white people, some Mallard inhabitants pass as white to imitate them and avoid facing violence again (Akre, 453–454). In light of the potential revelation of her secret by the Black family, Stella feels compelled to completely sever ties with the Black community, including her Black identity, and to fully embrace her white persona. As Akre observes, "she not only denies her Black affiliation and roots but she also acts as a foe to the Black race in exemplifying it via her devotion to the perpetuation of white supremacy" (Akre, 458). When Stella intervenes during the neighbors' meeting about the Black family's plan to move into the neighborhood, she heightens her performance. She no longer merely acts white, but actively pretends to embrace the ideology of white supremacy by advocating for the preservation of an exclusively white neighborhood, and discriminating against Black people. For once, she occupies the center of the attention and speaks up: "'You must stop them, Percy,' she said. 'If you don't, there'll be more and then what? Enough is enough!'" (Bennett, 2020, 152). The new character that Stella plays is authoritarian, as the use of the modal 'must' reveals. She does not ask Percy to prevent the Black family to move in, Stella actually asserts her authority as a white inhabitant of that neighborhood, and orders Percy to carry out the action of stopping the African American family to move in. Stella's tone is actually threatening and aggressive, the conditional structure "if you don't" creates tension and acts as a warning. Stella warns Percy against the consequences of that Black family's move in the neighborhood.

Stella knows how to convince her racist white audience to join her cause. She knows that her neighbors refuse to welcome Black people in their neighborhood, so she purposefully frightens them with a rhetorical question following a gradation "there'll be more and then what?" That device creates tension and implicitly forces them to join Stella's fight. That gradation illustrates the consequences of their inaction, and conveys a dystopian vision for those racist white individuals: the possibility that Black people outnumber white people in that neighborhood. Moreover, the rhetorical question "and then what?" suggests a worst-case scenario, meant to frighten Percy, and even the members of the audience, who also listen to Stella's speech. Stella is talking about potential new African American neighbors, yet her tone and her words do not correspond to the context; her speech sounds more like a military speech and presents similar rhetorical strategies, like urgency.

The modal 'must' present in Stella's speech reminds of Pericles's speech, the one that he pronounced in 432 BCE to appeal for war against the Spartans: "We must resist our enemies in any and every way."[7] A parallel can be drawn between Stella's speech and Pericles's: Stella addresses Percy in the same way Pericles addresses his soldiers. Stella's speech also echoes Winston Churchill's 1940 speech entitled "Their Finest Hour," since both speeches emphasize the consequences of an invasion, or of an eventual loss against the enemy: "If we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister."[8] Like in Stella's speech, the subordinating conjunction "if" is used in Churchill's speech, and also introduces a conditional structure which stresses the negative consequences of failure for that mission.

In addition, Stella also borrows another strategy from military speeches, which is the use of rhetorical questions. Napoleon Bonaparte's speech, pronounced before the battle of Marengo in 1800, also contains rhetorical questions like "Will you permit the army to escape which has carried

[7] Team Mighty. "16 Excerpts from the Greatest Military Speeches Ever Given." We Are the Mighty, 22 Feb. 2024, www.wearethemighty.com/lists/16-best-excerpts-greatest-military-speeches-ever-given.

[8] Pixelstorm. "Their Finest Hour." *International Churchill Society*, 11 May 2021, winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/their-finest-hour.

terror into your families?".[9] Rhetorical questions encourage the audience to engage with the speech and to ponder on the situation. In both Stella's speech and Bonaparte's, rhetorical questions serve to make the members of the audience react to the situation, and make them rally the orator's cause. Those rhetorical strategies have been used for centuries in military speeches, so by using those in her own speech, Stella inscribes herself in that tradition. The similarities between those military speeches and Stella's speech suggest that Stella is at war with the African American family, and that she encourages her white neighbors to take part in that war. Nevertheless, their purpose is not the same: the white neighbors want to preserve their white neighborhood – they refuse race mixing – whereas Stella wants to protect her secret and her white life. In this regard, the African American family can be perceived as Stella's enemies who must be stopped. Those African Americans are implicitly designated as invaders.

Finally, the exclamative "Enough is enough!" contributes to the credibility of Stella's role as the racist white woman, and is meant to express her indignation. The expression "Enough is enough" also appears in speeches delivered to answer back to a threat, like in the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech in 2024: "Well, I've come here today to say enough is enough."[10] Like Stella, Netanyahu uses that expression to show his indignation regarding the attacks from Iran, and to ask for the end of the conflict. However, Stella's use of the pronoun "enough" in the exclamative may be exaggerated in that context, because no African American people have moved in yet; "enough" is usually used when a required or needed quantity of something is reached. Since no Black people live in that neighborhood yet, Stella cannot be enough. Therefore, the exclamative "Enough is enough!" may be the exteriorization of her internal fears and pressure regarding the protection of her secret: she fears that the Black family may unmask her, and reveal her secret to everyone - and more specifically, to her white family.

Additionally, as an actor, Stella performs for an audience, but she selects the members of the audience: she performs for members of all ethnicities, except for Black members. Stella purposefully excludes African American characters from her audience, she fears that her credibility

[9] Team Mighty. "16 Excerpts from the Greatest Military Speeches Ever Given." We Are the Mighty, 22 Feb. 2024, www.wearethemighty.com/lists/16-best-excerpts-greatest-military-speeches-ever-given.

[10] Cna. "Netanyahu Tells UN Israel Seeks Peace but 'enough Is Enough.'" *CNA*, 27 Sept. 2024, www.channelnewsasia.com/world/israel-un-benjamin-netanyahu-seeks-peace-4643141.

may have limits. Stella indeed fears that Black characters would recognize the Black actor who hides behind the white character. Stella, as an actor, performs on a stage. Yet her stage is not a traditional one, because she does not perform on a limited scene. Her stage is actually the place where she stands; in this regard, her stage is mobile and constantly shifts, which means that she has to adapt.

Not only does she have to adapt to her shifting stage, but she also has to adapt to events in order to keep control over her performance. In her article "Acting Emotions," Elly A. Konijn describes the different techniques and ways for an actor to embody their character. She examines the relation between the actor and the character; she wonders to what extent the actor should engage emotionally with the character. She ponders on the level of involvement of the actor: if the actor should completely erase their personality, to leave room for the character, or if a part of the actor's personality should be found in the character. In order to answer those questions, she analyzes different acting styles and concepts. She also studies actors' capacity to control their performance as well as their audience's attention: "Likewise, controlling and directing the audience's attention is part of the actor's task as a professional. By maximizing command of the required stage action, the actor will be capable of controlling unexpected events" (Konijn, 66). In order not to be unmasked, Stella has to keep control over her audience: she shows them what she wants them to see, and conceals what she does not want them to see. When Stella finds out about the move of the Black family in her neighborhood, she immediately reacts in order to control that unexpected event. Her speech serves to convince, even more, her white neighbors that she is white. Her speech also serves to rally her white neighbors to her cause, so that they help her keep her secret, without being aware of it. Therefore, her strategy to control the unexpected event consists in a new performance: highlighting her whiteness while highlighting her hatred of the future neighbors, because they are Black; and encouraging her white neighbors to think like her.

Stella's performance is a success, as the reaction of the members of her audience reveals: "and the neighbors, moved by her spontaneous passion, applauded" (Bennett, 2020, 152). Stella's interpretation of the role of the angry racist white woman is so convincing that it provokes emotions within her neighbors as they are "moved." Like at the end of a performance, the neighbors applaud Stella, to show their appreciation and approval of her speech. The neighbors' reaction shows that Stella is credible: "credibility means creating 'the illusion of reality – as in daily life'; the actor is

invisible and the audience believes, for a moment, that the actor is the character" (Konijn, 48). By applauding, the neighbors implicitly show that they believe in Stella's interpretation of the racist white woman, without being aware that she is playing a role. The neighbors' applause also suggests that they agree with Stella and identify with her: the racist white woman that they think she is.

c) Stage Names and Identity

In addition, as an experienced passing character, Stella is portrayed as an expert on the topic of identity. After discovering her Black ancestry, Kennedy starts her journey of self-discovery. Nevertheless, Stella disagrees with Kennedy's approach to finding herself:

> Went to find myself, she wrote. I'm safe. Don't worry about me. The language bothered Stella most of all. You didn't just find a self out there waiting – you had to make one. You had to create who you wanted to be (Bennett, 2020, 325).

Kennedy and Stella hold opposing views on identity: Kennedy thinks that one *finds* oneself, whereas her mother thinks that one *creates* oneself. Kennedy's approach is passive compared to Stella's, which suggests that one can be whoever they want to be, they just have to create that persona. Stella implicitly perceives one's identity as a performance. Nevertheless, Stella's interpretation of identity is flawed, as her definition implies that performing an identity requires both acting and deception – suggesting that who you want to be is not necessarily who you truly are. To fully embody a created self, one must hide the aspects of their life that do not align with that new identity. Through that definition, Stella implicitly justifies her passing performance: she created the person that she wanted to be, and concealing her Black ancestry was part of the process.

However, despite her brilliant performance, and her mastery of identity-related concepts, Stella still doubts her acting skills and her ability to create the illusion. A form of paranoia indeed exists within Stella: the narrative shows that she sometimes questions her audience's absorption

into her performance. Stella indeed wonders if Loretta Walker, her Black friend and neighbor, sincerely believes that she is white or, if as a Black character, she figured out that Stella is also Black. Stella's paranoia is shown by the fact that she interprets other characters' actions as a sign that they know about her secret. During Loretta's hand reading, the latter tells Stella that her life has been interrupted and then smiles because everything she tells her is fake, she does not read hands. Yet Stella interprets that reaction differently: "Loretta smiled, and again, Stella wondered if she knew. Maybe the whole time, Loretta had just been playing along" (Bennett, 2020, 190). Stella's paranoia leads her to interpret Loretta's smile as a sign that the latter knows about her secret. Stella's first thought is to believe that Loretta figured out her birth race instead of thinking that that reading is a joke, which reflects her constant fear of being unmasked. The adverb 'again' demonstrates that her apprehension is like an obsession; it is not the first time that she wonders if anybody knows about her secret. Her paranoia is strengthened by the hypothesis which follows her internal questioning; that hypothesis indeed is introduced by the adverb 'maybe.'

Stella probably thinks that Loretta discovered her secret because the latter is Black; as a child, Stella has been told that Black people could recognize other Black people, it is like a racial connection: "We always know our own, her mother said" (Bennett, 2020, 156). The adverb 'always' suggests that that is a certitude and that Stella cannot escape that rule. Moreover, the fact that her mother, a figure of authority for a child, is the one who told her those words, reinforces its veracity for her. That explains Stella's constant fear of being unmasked; but her fear of being recognized by Black characters also comes from one of her passing rehearsals.

Before performing her white character permanently, Stella, like all actors do, rehearsed her passing. One of her rehearsals is her experience at the charm shop which I already studied in the previous pages. Her second rehearsal occurred weeks after the charm shop episode; this time, her approach was more direct and audacious. She indeed did not limit herself to entering a whites' shop, but went to the City Museum of Art on a day reserved for non-Black individuals, and walked into the main entrance. Once inside, a Black guard noticed her and winked at her (157). That shows that at that moment of her passing journey, Stella could deceive white people only. However, it also demonstrates that Stella's passing skills have evolved over time. Initially, she could only deceive white people and was quickly unmasked by Black individuals. Over time, however, she develops the ability to deceive everyone, regardless of race.

Her final rehearsal, before her departure with Blake which marks her permanent passing, was at Maison Blanche. Compared to her previous experiences, her job at Maison Blanche led her to actually interact with white people and mimic them in order to be integrated. Initially, Stella started to pass daily in order to survive, she "would have to pretend a little but a little pretending to keep them [Stella and Desiree] off the streets seemed worth it" (Bennett, 2020, 66). The chiasmic structure of the sentence reveals a purpose, pretending is the means by which she can survive. The second part of the sentence which is introduced by the conjunction "but" reveals that "pretending" is a burden, the conjunction marks the opposition between the negative aspect of this job and the benefit from it. The use of the verb 'pretend' instead of 'pass as' also shows the evolution of Stella's journey. To pretend suggests that she would play a role with no desire to become white, her purpose would be to appear white only. However, when she definitively passes as white, she acts in order to appear white but she also erases her Black heritage.

When Stella works at Maison Blanche, she still separates her Black self and her white character as "at work, Stella became Miss Vignes or, as Desiree called her, White Stella" (Bennett, 2020, 197). The association between Stella's work place and the verb "became" suggests that her location influences her identity, and highlights the transformation that she undergoes when she is at work. The way Stella calls her at-work alter ego and the way Desiree calls her, emphasizes their two different views on the new Stella. When she is Miss Vignes, she is just another version of herself because as a non-married woman she is supposed to be called Miss and Vignes is her true surname. It also elevates her in society because the title 'Miss' was not applied to Black women during segregation. Therefore, it confirms the fact that she is perceived as white at work. However, when Desiree calls her 'White Stella,' she designates another person, she suggests that 'White Stella' is a different person.

Elly A Konijn analyzes the concept of "'dédoublement,' in which the personality of the actor makes place for that of the character […] In this sense of 'dédoublement' the character (the role) is the actor himself" (Konijn, 46). Stella's 'dédoublement' is different, because she is quiet and shy both in her role as 'Miss Vignes' and as Stella Vignes. Nevertheless, Stella Vignes's personality does not make place for that of the character; it is actually Stella Vignes's race which makes place for that of the character – 'Miss Vignes.' Stella's 'dédoublement' happens at a racial level, her Black self is erased and is replaced by her white character. For Stella, being Miss Vignes

represents an advantage, because it provides her a social status and better living conditions. However, despite Stella's ability to switch races, and despite the creation of a new identity, Stella cannot completely erase her Black identity. Her white identity was not constructed entirely from scratch, she retained elements of her Black identity, such as her first name: "She was still, he assumed, Stella. A new first name was too difficult to get used to. Only a professional con man could assume a completely new identity and Stella was nobody's professional" (Bennett, 2020, 99). The fact that Stella kept her first name to play her role, shows that her white identity is not entirely invented, the actor shares some elements with her character. Moreover, the meaning of the name 'Stella' may also justify that choice, her name means 'star,' and is associated with light. Like in the Bible, God's light represents hope, clarity, and guidance. Stella is hopeful about the success of her passing thanks to her acting capacities. Her name seems to give her the status of actor because actors are often referred to as 'stars'. In addition, her name reflects her desire to succeed and her hopes, because 'Stella' is not her birth name, Kennedy indeed reveals to Jude that Stella's first name is actually 'Estelle.' The fact that Stella changed her first name demonstrates that she has always controlled her identity. Even before passing, she already chose who she wanted to be.

Furthermore, Stella interprets the role of the wealthy white woman, but does not completely change her identity. The fact that she does not solely change her identity is not the result of her desire to remain connected to her Black self, but as Early suggests, it is because Stella is not a professional actor. When Early states that Stella is not a "professional con man" (Bennett, 2020, 99), he implies that her identity as a Black woman prevents her from being solely a white woman. Con men are people who lie about every aspect of their life in order to obtain what they want, usually money. Their capacity to lie as much makes them identity less: they can embody anybody because they do not have an identity, they are like a blank canvas. Contrary to con men, for Stella, playing the role of the white woman is sometimes intricate, because she has a past and a Black identity, that she tries to hide and to replace with a white identity through her acting. She also conceals, and may even erase her Black identity by replacing her surname with Blake's. Although they are married, she could have chosen to keep her maiden name, or at least, she could have hyphenated Blake's surname with her maiden name. Her choice to abandon her maiden name reflects her choice to sever ties with her Black life, since her maiden name is associated with her Black heritage and history. Her surname is associated with her father, Leon Vignes, who suffered racially-motivated violence, like lynchings, and who died as a victim of racial injustices and racism.

Not only does her maiden name represent her Black ancestry, but it also represents the racially-motivated violence that her family endured, and that Stella personally experienced when she was still Stella Vignes. She was indeed a victim of sexual violence by a white man when she was a teenager in Mallard. However, changing her surname does not allow her to sever ties with her Black life, as trauma prevents her from doing so: "Blake pressed open her thighs and the man with the red-gold hair was on top of her – she could almost smell his sweat, see the freckles on his back" (Bennett, 2020, 168). During that sexual encounter between Stella and Blake, the man who attacked Leon Vignes in Mallard appears to Stella. That sudden appearance functions as a reminder of Stella's decision to pass – she coveted security. She chose to become a white woman because, after seeing her father being attacked by white men, she became aware of the dangers surrounding Black individuals. Besides her witnessing such violence against Black people, Stella also experienced violence because she was a Black woman. Her employer at Opelousas indeed raped her – probably because she was Black. Black women were indeed hypersexualized, as explained by Jacqueline Pittman in her article "Constructing Race and Gender in Modern Rape Law: the Abandoned Category of Black Female Victims." Pittman discusses the status of women as rape victims. She writes that despite the anti-rape movements which occurred in the 1960s, Black men are still portrayed as sexual predators, and white women are perceived as their victims. Moreover, not only is this image problematic, but it also denies visibility to Black women who are themselves victims of sexual violence. Instead, Black women are perceived as hypersexualized; Pittman denounces the fact that this portrayal historically justified white men's rapes of Black women:

> In early years, Black women's sexuality was seen as "wild, uncontrollable, bestial, and even criminal," and as such, Black women were seen as always desiring of sex. […] These stereotypes resulted in disproportionate incidences of white men raping Black women under the guise of protecting the perceived chastity and purity of white women (Pittman, 182).

As a Black woman, Stella was probably perceived as a hypersexual woman by white men. Although the narrative does not mention it, it is possible that that white man attacked Stella because he objectified and sexualized her. He may have assumed that he was in his right to rape Stella. The man who appears to Stella instead of Blake, represents the dangers that Stella escaped from while starting to pass as white.

The line between past and present, between her Black life and her white life, is blurred. Stella's mind still bears the marks of racial violence despite her new life, her trauma proves that changing her surname does not erase her past, it just creates the illusion of a brand new life. Therefore, for Stella, changing her surname may be a way to attempt to break ties with that painful past, and to make her white character official: while adopting Blake's surname, Sanders, Stella is associated with a white lineage. That surname acts as a marker of Stella's new white life. Adopting that surname also allows her to guarantee her safety, in a way, because that white man would not have sexually harassed Stella if she was a white woman. Stella's desire to leave her Black life behind her by abandoning her Black identity, and playing a white character, is highlighted in the narrative by the metaphor of the curtain: "A curtain hung between her past and present and she could never peek behind it" (Bennett, 2020, 159). The noun "curtain" emphasizes the theatricality of her life as a white character, for it recalls the curtain which separates backstage and stage. That separation makes Stella's performance possible. If she wants to raise the curtain which separates her from her audience to perform, Stella must progressively abandon her true self to become the actor. She must first close the curtain separating her symbolical backstage from her symbolical stage.

Once she does that, she can begin her performance and interact with her audience. Her Black life, which corresponds to her "past" is the backstage, and her white life, which is her present, is the play which is being performed on stage. The backstage is the place where actors prepare for their performance, where they can rehearse; if Stella's past is the backstage, it implies that even during her life as a Black individual, she already rehearsed for her role as a white character. Those rehearsals correspond to the passing experiences studied at the beginning of this section. Stella cannot "peek behind" that metaphorical curtain, because doing so would compromise her performance. Now that she is playing the role of a white woman, she must remain in that role, peeking behind that curtain would equate to breaking character. In the case of con men, there is no 'dédoublement,' because they lack an identity of their own; there is no distinction between the actor and the character: they are not actors, they simply are characters.

d) Barry and Bianca

Furthermore, passing as white is not the only passing performance in *The Vanishing Half*. As a novel published in 2020, it deals with contemporary themes, like gender fluidity. In the novel, the character of Barry gives a double performance: he performs his daily identity as Barry, the male teacher who goes to church (135), and literally performs on stage, as Bianca. Barry's performance differs from Stella's in that he does not imitate or embody a created character; rather, he performs another integral part of his identity:

> He was Bianca on two Saturday nights a month, and otherwise, he pushed her out of sight, even though he thought about her, shopped for her, planned for her eventual return. Barry went to faculty meetings and family reunions and church, Bianca always lingering on the edge of his mind. She had her role to play and Barry had his. You could live a life this way, split. As long as you knew who was in charge (Bennett, 2020, 135).

Barry does not *play* Bianca; Bianca is described as a completely distinct person. Contrary to the other passing characters, Bianca is not a continuation of Barry, or another version of Barry. There is an emphasis on the separation of their two lives through the adjective "split," which suggests that they are two different persons within the same body. That idea is reinforced by the last sentence of that quote "as long as you knew who was in charge," which suggests that Barry and Bianca alternately take control of Barry's body. It implies that they both exist in the present and complement each other. Unlike other passing characters, Bianca does not replace Barry, nor does Barry replace Bianca. While Stella and Clare have a double racial heritage, Barry has a double gender identity, but he refuses to choose one over the other. Therefore, he shares his body between his two identities. Barry's body is the vessel with which he is able to navigate his two identities. Moreover, both Barry and Bianca are described as actors playing a role, which implies that both of them perform their respective identities. Barry and Bianca are opposites in terms of gender – Barry is referred to as "he," while Bianca is designated by "she" – but also in lifestyle. Barry leads an ordinary and serious life, whereas Bianca, a Drag Queen, thrives in the world of entertainment.

Even though they live separate lives, they do not live equally: Bianca's existence is limited both temporally and spatially. She appears only "on two Saturday nights a month" and exclusively at Mirage, the venue where she performs. The name of that place symbolizes the impossibility for Barry and Bianca to coexist in society. A mirage represents something that seems real yet unattainable – an illusion. The coexistence of those two identities could, therefore, be seen as illusory: Bianca cannot exist in society and can only be performed within the confines of Mirage, a space detached from societal norms as it embodies illusions. Consequently, when Barry is present in society, Bianca exists merely as a thought, or a memory. Additionally, the name of the club also evokes performance. A mirage indeed is an optical illusion; when Barry performs as Bianca at Mirage, he intends to be looked at – to perform a show. Since Bianca appears exclusively at Mirage – a locus inherently tied to spectacle – she is condemned to exist only as a show. Despite Bianca's full existence as a character, her appearances are controlled by Barry, who determines when to conceal her and who plans her "eventual return."

Like Black Stella and white Stella, Barry and Bianca present two distinct physical appearances. To emphasize the difference between their original selves and the characters they perform, they wear costumes that contribute to the portrayal of their roles: "Bianca strutted onstage, a purple boa wrapped around her broad shoulders, and belted out 'Dim All the Lights.' She wore ruby red lipstick and a big blonde wig like Dolly Parton" (Bennett, 2020, 115).

Dolly Parton in 1976 (Putler).

Those accessories contribute to the performance of Bianca, yet they do not hide Barry's body, they just adorn it since Barry's "broad shoulders" are still visible. Barry cannot be unmasked, for Bianca is not his mask. Barry does not perform Bianca to access privileges in society, and does

not risk to lose everything if Bianca is discovered. Yet Barry limits Bianca to the *Mirage* club. Indeed, Jude arrives "at his [Barry's] apartment to find him wearing a polo shirt and slacks, scratching his bearded cheek" (Bennett, 2020, 115). Outside *Mirage*, Barry is "in charge" of his body, he performs his male identity with his male clothes, and his attitude as he scratches his beard, a feature associated with the male gender. Bianca's purpose is not to create the illusion that she was born a woman: "Otherwise, he was a tall, bald man who looked nothing like a woman, which was part of the delight, she [Jude] realized, watching the enraptured crowd. It was fun because everyone knew that it was not real" (Bennett, 2020, 115). Contrary to Stella, Bianca does not intend to fool her audience, she does not mean to pass as a woman since the audience is aware that she is not. To pass successfully, the audience is not supposed to see the identity of the actor, yet Barry's traits are perceivable through Bianca, as his height and his baldness are seen by the audience. The members of the audience are aware that they are attending a performance, and are meant to be conscious of it since they know that a drag queen is a performed character. Even though Bianca is a different person than Barry, Bianca's performance consists in embodying a woman with a man's body. In this respect, her performance does not consist in covering Barry's identity as a man, but to include his masculine body in her performance.

3) Passing as a Performance in Larsen's Passing

a) Blurring the Lines: Between Acting and Reality, Between Past and Present

Like Stella, Clare Kendry, blurs the line between acting and reality in Larsen's *Passing*. Clare is aware that she is not really white, and actually does not want to really be white; she wants to remain connected to her Black self. Yet since Clare was given a white education, acting white may be natural for her. She may have started the imitation process as a child, when she moved to her white aunts' house after her father's death. Therefore, she has been raised as a white girl. While Stella rehearsed her passing performance through brief passing experiences, Clare rehearsed her passing performance during her whole childhood with her white aunts. In this respect, Stella's and Clare's opposite attitudes are coherent: Clare is unafraid of being extroverted because she is confident in her passing, as a professional passing performer, whereas Stella's strategy of being taciturn is justified by the fact that she is less experienced than Clare. That opposition between Stella and Clare is mentioned by Brit Bennett in her introduction to Larsen's *Passing*:

> When I started writing my own novel *The Vanishing Half*, about passing, I imagined my passing character as a sort of fugitive, always hunted, always hiding. In some ways, this is the more obvious choice. The brilliance of *Passing* to me, is that Larsen reverses the game of cat-and-mouse. Clare hunts, not hides. She reveals, rather than being discovered. From the moment they reunite on the roof, Clare inserts herself into Irene's life, pursing the Black world she has purportedly left behind. She invites herself to Irene's home, introduces herself to Irene's husband, crashes Irene's social engagements in Harlem, and charms Irene's friends. She does, in other words, exactly what a passing character should not do (Bennett, 2021, xvii).

Bennett emphasizes the difference between Stella's personality and Clare's. Stella embodies the traditional passing character, as she strives to protect her secret while blending in her entourage, all the while being haunted by her past: people from her past look for her. Stella is hunted by

Early: “For years, Early tracked Stella Vignes until she was no longer Stella Vignes” (Bennett, 2020, 99). Unlike Jude, Early’s job consists in searching for people, the verb “tracked” suggests that Early searches closely for Stella, that verb belongs to the lexical field of hunting. Since Early hunts Stella, the latter is positioned as a prey, and is passive. Stella is then supposed to run away not to be found by the hunter. Yet she is not found by him, but by Jude, “Stella’s mistake had been to think that she could settle anywhere. You had to keep moving or the past would always catch up to you” (Bennett, 2020, 274). Indeed, Stella remained in the same city after her permanent passing, which made her an easy target. The word “mistake” reveals that Stella is aware that people from her past are looking for her, yet she still decided to settle despite the risks. The fact that Early tracked Stella Vignes suggests that he hunted a version of Stella who no longer existed, which explains his failure to find her, but also explains Jude’s success.

Jude indeed looked for Stella *Sanders* while following Early’s hunting advice: “You could find just about anybody if you were good at lying, he [Early] told her” (Bennett, 2020, 86). During her investigation, Jude hides the truth about her connection to Stella, and to Kennedy, she acts as if she was interested in Kennedy’s family, like a friend would; Jude is a good liar because Kennedy does not question Jude’s interest in her and in her mother. Kennedy unconsciously contributed to the success of Jude’s investigation, for Jude approached Kennedy in order to investigate on Stella: “You don’t know anyone named Vignes, do you? (Bennett, 2020, 231). Jude seeks confirmation that Stella is Kennedy’s mother; to do so, she conducts her investigation while concealing the fact that she knows Stella. By using the indefinite pronoun “anyone,” Jude avoids specifically designating Stella. Her strategy consists in prompting Kennedy to name Stella herself, allowing Jude to obtain the confirmation she was seeking without arousing Kennedy’s suspicion regarding Jude’s connection to Stella. Moreover, Jude’s question is indirect; the tag question structure consists in a negative statement, in that quote the statement focuses on the bearer of the name ‘Vignes’ in Kennedy’s circle, with a subsequent question aiming at confirming that statement. The use of a tag question instead of a direct question, shows that Jude assumes that Kennedy knows someone named ‘Vignes,’ it suggests that Jude is not asking out of curiosity but has a purpose.

Furthermore, Jude started working at the theater where Kennedy performs in order to increase her chances to meet Stella. Her efforts paid off: “She was shoveling lukewarm popcorn into a paper bag when she saw, finally, Stella” (Bennett, 2020, 263). The adverb “finally,” placed right before her prey’s name, implies that Jude achieved her goal: she found Stella. That adverb

suggests that Jude put considerable effort into finding Stella, and that she is now rewarded with the discovery she sought.

Moreover, Clare's attitude sharply contrasts with Stella's. Clare does not intend to hide, she is a seductress and as Bennett claims, Clare has a "sense of playfulness. She does not take anything seriously enough" (Bennett, 2021, xvii). She is reckless regarding her passing performance and does not hesitate to take risks as her friends Irene and Gertrude highlight: "'Yes, it certainly seems risky,' Irene admitted. 'Risky! I should say it was. Risky! My God! What a word! And the mess she's liable to get herself into!'" (Larsen, 1929, 48). Clare's friends do not understand Clare's attitude and recklessness, the exclamatives reflect their bewilderment regarding Clare's risks, and their reaction is reinforced by the repetition of the adjective "risky" which emphasizes and defines Clare's way of passing. Irene, as an occasionally passing character, and Gertrude, as a permanent passing character, both take risks because passing as white in a segregated society is a risk in itself. Yet the stress on Clare's risky passing implies that Clare takes unnecessary risks for the performance of her white character, she takes those risks because she wants to.

Clare does not pass as white merely to access whites' privileges, she passes as white because it represents a challenge, Clare enjoys seduction, and performing her white character requires charm and the ability to seduce her audience. Clare is willing to do whatever it takes to obtain what she wants, despite the risks and the contradictions – such as marrying a racist white man, and living a double life as both a white and a Black woman. She does not want to be limited and restrained by her race, and by society so she challenges those limits. As Gertrude claims: "Anything might have happened" (Larsen 1929, 48). That is what Clare enjoys, she wants to experience things plainly, passing as white is a risky performance because it is improvised. Therefore, when she reunites her racist white husband and her Black friends, Clare enjoys the uncertainty of the outcome of that scene. In addition, Clare purposefully reunited those characters because she was curious about her friends' reaction to the encounter with Clare's racist white husband. As I will be explaining further down, Clare is implicitly testing her friends' loyalty.

Moreover, Clare reverses the roles of the hunter from the passing character's past and the passing character as the prey. Here Clare is the hunter and Irene is her prey. Unlike Stella, Clare does not attempt to escape her past, but she paradoxically pursues it. Traditional passing characters sever ties with their past as Black individuals in order to increase their chances to succeed in their performance, yet Clare is not afraid of taking risks. When the latter recognizes Irene on the

Drayton roof, both of them are passing. While Clare is confident in her passing, Irene doubts her passing skills when Clare, whom she thinks to be a stranger, observes her. Thus, when Clare approaches her, she fears having been unmasked: "Suddenly her small fright increased. Her neighbor had risen and was coming toward her. What was going to happen now?" (Larsen, 1929, 15). In that situation, Irene is positioned as the frightened prey, and Clare as the hunter. Irene's fear evolves along with Clare's movement: the more Clare approaches, the more Irene fears having been unmasked. In that scene, Irene is in an inferior position, for she is seated while Clare is standing. As a hunter, Clare invades Irene's space while walking toward her. Irene is indeed in an inferior position, for the outcome of that situation does not depend on her, but on Clare, as the interrogative "What was going to happen now?" suggests. Irene does not know Clare's intentions. As a hunter, only Clare knows what will happen to Irene, the latter is powerless and passive: she can only wait in fear.

That scene reveals that Clare is the one who takes the initiative to reconnect with her past as a Black girl, since Irene embodies that past. The roles are therefore reversed: Clare was expected to be the frightened prey, and Irene the hunter, because the latter possesses the power to unmask Clare. Instead of fleeing the danger that Irene could represent for her secret, Clare heads toward it. The encounter with Irene reveals Clare's "sense of playfulness" as she incorporates the ultimate living proof of her true identity into her passing performance while intruding into Irene's life, as a way to pursue the Black life that she did not have the chance to continue when her father died. The conciliation of her past life and of her current life as a white woman allows Clare to challenge her passing performance as Irene renders the outcome of Clare's performance uncertain.

b) Clare Kendry: A Taste for Risk

Clare is more confident about her passing skills than Stella is, because Clare has lived as a white individual since childhood, and she has lived as a white individual longer than as a Black individual. During the conversation between Irene and Clare on the Drayton's roof, Clare encourages Irene to pass as white too, and claims that passing is easy:

> "You know, 'Rene, I've often wondered why more colored girls, girls like you and Margaret Hammer and Esther Dawson and – oh, lots of others – never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve."
> "What about background? Family, I mean. Surely you can't just drop down on people from nowhere and expect them to receive you with open arms, can you?"
> "Almost," Clare asserted. "You'd be surprised, 'Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us. Maybe because there are so many more of them, or maybe because they are secure and so don't have to bother. I've never quite decided. Irene was inclined to be incredulous.
> "You mean that you didn't have to explain where you came from? It seems impossible."
> Clare cast a glance of repressed amusement across the table at her. "As a matter of fact, I didn't. Though I suppose under any other circumstances I might have had to provide some plausible tale to account for myself. I've a good imagination, so I'm sure I could have done it quite creditably, and credibly. But it wasn't necessary. There were my aunts, you see, respectable and authentic enough for anything or anybody."
> "I see. They were 'passing,' too."
> "No. They weren't. They were white" (Larsen, 1929, 25).

In that dialogue between Irene and Clare, the latter is positioned as a teacher of 'passing.' Irene does not know anything about passing, and Clare educates her, as the punctuation reveals. Most of Irene's interventions end with a question mark, while all Clare's interventions are affirmative. The last time that Irene intervenes in that quote, she gives a wrong answer that Clare has to correct. Clare's correction serves as a reminder of Clare's mixed heritage for Irene. The double negation in her cue is followed by the revelation of what Clare's aunts actually were: white. That dialogue highlights Clare's position of superiority over Irene, as a teacher, and as a mixed character. Passing as white is indeed very easy for Clare, who has a white ancestry and a white family to prove it. She

also has been raised as a white individual, which makes her performance appear less like acting, and more like the highlighting of the white part of her ancestry. In order to embody her white character, Clare's Black ancestry disappears and leaves room for her white ancestry. Clare emphasizes how easy it is to pass as white, as the adverb "frightfully" demonstrates. That adverb is reinforced and intensified by the determiner "such," and is associated with the adjective "easy;" together, they insist on the simplicity of the practice of passing. Besides the ease with which Clare passes, the adverb "frightfully" contains the word "fright," subtly suggesting that despite her confidence, Clare may be concealing her fear of being unmasked. Clare also suggests that passing may be within every light-skinned African American girls' reach because they fill in the skin color criterion; and the pronoun "all" in "all that's needed is a little nerve" implies that passing as white does not require many skills, just courage, but a small quantity is enough. Clare's incomprehension regarding the non-passing of those light-skinned African American girls, also reveals her unawareness of the risks of passing as white.

Like Stella, Clare thinks that white people are easy to fool. The white characters' blindness is highlighted in both Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, and Larsen's *Passing*. The two protagonists also use white characters as accessories, who reinforce and confirm their whiteness. Clare claims that her white aunts rendered her white character credible through the adjective "authentic," which suggests that since Clare's aunts were, and were perceived as real white women. Their 'authentic' whiteness makes Clare's whiteness authentic too. In this regard, Clare's passing seems passive, for she does not need to act white as her white aunts implicitly demonstrate that she is white. As a consequence, white people do not question her past and her whiteness, and her passing performance is easy, as she claims. As a mixed character, Clare's Black ancestry leaves room for her white ancestry. She performs a part of her identity, she does not create a new one from scratch. Despite her facility to embody a white character, Clare does not deny her past as a Black girl and her Black ancestry, for she includes herself in the Black community with the pronoun "us," which designates African Americans. In addition, the fact that she still calls Irene "'Rene" shows that Clare does not deny her past as a Black girl, because that is a nickname that she used to give Irene when they were children. That nickname corresponds to the time when Clare was still Black, and when she was still living with her father. The fact that Clare still calls Irene "'Rene," and especially when both of them are passing when that conversation occurs, also serves to mark her power over Irene: Clare condemns Irene to remain Black despite Irene's passing. Clare implicitly prevents Irene from fully

embodying a white character, because that nickname is associated with Irene as a Black woman. That is actually paradoxical regarding Clare's suggestion of passing. Clare's suggestion may be sarcastic because she may know that Irene could not pass as white permanently. As shown above, Irene is not as confident as Clare when it comes to passing.

Furthermore, Clare's capacity to embody a different character is highlighted by her dual personality as a child. Clare indeed seemed to have two personalities: "Catlike. Certainly that was the word which best described Clare Kendry, if any single word could describe her. Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive" (Larsen, 1929, 5). The comparison with the cat echoes Clare's acting skills and performance. Cats are known for having nine lives; Clare may be able to live nine lives through characters than she could embody as an actor. In addition, Clare's double personality, as a child, foreshadows her capacity to perform passing: she has indeed always been two different persons. That duality is reinforced by Clare's double mixed heritage, which condemned her to embody two races, two cultures, two heritages. In addition, her "catlike" demeanor refers to her dual personality, but also echoes Bennett's image of Clare as the cat in the "the game of cat-and-mouse."

Moreover, like Stella, Clare is designated as Clare *Kendry* in spite of her marriage with John Bellew. The use of her maiden name rather than her husband's surname reveals Clare's desire to remain connected to her Black ancestry, and to her dead Black father. When she approaches Irene at the beginning of the novel, on the roof of the Drayton, she introduces herself as Clare Kendry and she "had omitted to mention her marriage name. She had referred to her husband as Jack. That was all. Had that, Irene asked herself, been intentional?" (Larsen, 1929, 31–32). Clare is a professional performer, she intentionally omitted to mention her marriage name. She may have omitted this piece of information to create suspense over her husband in perspective of their future encounter.

Clare is ready to take any risks to obtain what she wants, and when she encountered Irene at the Drayton, she was already planning to introduce Irene to her husband. Clare indeed insisted for Irene to visit her on Tuesday: "Oh do try. Do put somebody else off. The others can see you anytime, while I – Why, I may never see you again! Think of that, 'Rene! You'll have to come. You'll simply have to! I'll never forgive you if you don't" (Larsen, 1929, 30). Clare begs Irene to

accept her invitation, Clare uses pathos in order to convince her. The interjection “Oh” conveys Clare’s emotions and reinforces her supplication, which contributes to the creation of pathos. Pathos is also created by the exclamative “Why I may never see you again!” which emphasizes Clare’s despair about not spending time with Irene. The dash which precedes that exclamative imitates Clare’s hesitation and change of tone; the dash emphasizes the dramatic effect created by Clare’s statement and suggests an emotional moment before expressing how that situation affects her. In order to convince Irene, Clare is emotional and authoritative as she orders Irene to visit her on Tuesday. Clare uses the imperative to assert her authority over Irene and to force her to do what Clare wants. She commands and urges Irene to “think of that”: the association of the imperative tone with the exclamation mark indicates Clare’s firmness and reinforces her authoritative tone. By naming ’Rene after a short pause marked by a comma, Clare seems to pressure Irene to think of her request. In addition, Clare also asserts her authority and expresses her requests through the anaphoric sentences “You’ll have to come. You’ll simply have to!” which also function as a gradation. Clare indeed does not ask her to come, she obliges Irene to come as the modal-like expression “have to” demonstrates. Clare makes Irene passive twice, through the gradation: the first sentence “You’ll have to come” serves to reveal Clare’s decision, and the second sentence “You’ll simply have to” confirms Clare’s decision. The adverb “simply” implies that no debate is possible, and that Clare will not accept Irene’s refusal since Clare has already made up her mind; the exclamation mark reinforces that statement and once again reflects Clare’s authoritative tone.

Not only does Clare use pathos and her authority to pressure Irene to accept her invitation, but she also manipulates her. The conditional structure of the last sentence “I’ll never forgive you if you don’t” functions as a threat: in that sentence, Clare does not express her own emotions, but plays with Irene’s. Clare concludes her speech with an ultimatum: Irene either stays in Clare’s life or leaves it. Clare is a professional manipulator because through the conditional structure, she lets Irene think that the latter has the choice, but Clare implicitly forces her to accept her invitation. Clare knows how to be dramatic, which makes her a professional performer; she knows that she can obtain what she wants while performing. Clare forces Irene to accept her invitation because she has an idea in mind: she wants to challenge traditional passing, and to show that she can control her dual identity and her dual life.

Clare indeed orchestrates the encounter between Irene and John Bellew: "'How lovely! Here's Jack at exactly the right minute. You can't go now, 'Rene dear'" (Larsen, 1929, 41). Clare is described as a provocateur and as a playful character. While bringing up her past life as a Black character and her current life as a passing character, Clare takes risks and challenges her passing performance. She also challenges her guests, Irene and Gertrude, for she did not inform them that her husband is racist. By keeping that piece of information to herself, Clare implicitly forces her guests to perform and to join her performance. Clare's exclamation "How lovely!" suggests that she is delighted that the encounter she organized is finally about to take place. That exclamation also precedes Clare's comment "here's Jack at exactly the right minute," which has two meanings: in appearance, Clare is just reacting to her husband's arrival, she simply implies that she can introduce her husband and her guests. Nevertheless, for Clare, that comment suggests that her game can finally start. The use of the adverb "exactly" and of the adjective "right" underscores Clare's satisfaction in view of the junction of her two lives, and of the successful implementation of her plan. Once again, Clare asserts her power over Irene and prevents the latter from leaving. The use of the modal 'can' in the negative mode implies that Clare does not allow Irene to leave before her encounter with John: she implicitly forces Irene to take part in her performance and to pass as white. In this respect, Clare controls Irene's and Gertrude's identities, as she impels them to pass as white. That game orchestrated by Clare serves as a loyalty test: she takes the risk to be unmasked, in order to know if her friends would pass as white to protect her secret. Clare knows exactly what she does, and does not miss a chance to challenge her performance, so when she omits to mention her marriage name on the Drayton roof, she does it on purpose: she is already preparing her game.

Despite the passing characters' ability to give a convincing performance, and to embody their character, they also have to include some members of their audience to their passing performance in order to protect their secret. While Stella remains cautious in protecting her secret, Clare does quite the opposite, yet still ensures the success of her performance.

4) Protecting the secret

a) From Spectators to Actors in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and in Larsen's *Passing*, the end of the passing is different. Stella's performance ends in the eyes of Kennedy Sanders only, whereas Clare's performance definitively ends with her death. Even if the passing characters have control over their passing performance, the audience also contributes to the success of that performance, as it is successful only if the members of the audience do not realize that they attend a performance. In this regard, the audience also has control over the end of that passing performance: when the members of the audience understand that the passing character is only playing a role, the performance is over. Nevertheless, when some members of the audience discover the truth, the performance ends only for those who know that it is a performance, but it does not necessarily end for the rest of the audience.

Those characters who discovered the passing can either expose the passing characters, or keep the secret. Not only do those who choose to keep the secret allow the performance to continue for the other characters, but they become performers too. Stella's daughter, Kennedy Sanders, plays the same role of the passing character, but this time, she is aware of it. When Kennedy finds out about Stella's secret, she decides to play along, and not to reveal her mother's secret, even though Kennedy does not understand her mother, and does not know much about her:

> "My roommate. This girl I lived with, she was from my town."
> "You never told me that before," Kennedy said. "You never tell me anything about your life." […] "It's not about that," she said. "It's not about that girl at all. It's just like, it's impossible to know anything about you. I have to beg you just to tell me about some roommate you had and you're my mother. Why don't you want me to know you?" (Bennett, 2020, 277).

During the visit to Kennedy's new apartment, Stella becomes emotional and makes a mistake by implicitly referring to her sister, Desiree. That slip provokes Kennedy's anger, as it highlights her

limited knowledge of her mother's past. Kennedy emphasizes that Stella never opens up about her history, a fact underscored by the anaphoristic structure: "You never told me," "You never tell me." There is a progression in Kennedy's frustration; she begins by referencing a specific anecdote and then generalizes her complaint into an ongoing issue. The interrogative "Why don't you want me to know you?" reflects Kennedy's confusion regarding her mother's secrecy and serves as a confrontation. While Kennedy does not understand the reasons behind Stella's secrecy, she recognizes that their relationship deviates from the norm of a typical mother-daughter bond. Unlike other members of Stella's audience, Kennedy suspects that her mother harbors a secret, though she remains unaware of its nature.

Yet despite their estrangement and their miscommunication, the two characters are actually similar, since they both pass as white, even though Kennedy is unaware of it. Kennedy's personality and identity have been built on the belief that she was a wealthy white girl. Since Kennedy perceives her mother as white, she also identifies her mother as a wealthy white girl, like her: "According to Kristeva the mother's face is the first object that the child looks at and identifies with while still in the pre-oedipal stage. As the child forms her own identity, the mother's face becomes a lost object" (Thaggert, 6). In Kennedy's case, it is different because she did not form her own identity; she simply became who she was expected to be: a wealthy white girl. In this sense, she unconsciously built her identity around the stereotype of a wealthy white girl. This is a consequence of Stella's creation of the fictional world Kennedy lives in, as well as Kennedy's own naivety. Kennedy is an actor but fails to distinguish reality from the fiction created by her mother. She cannot differentiate between acting and truly being, as she only performs an identity she believes to be her own: "Kennedy Sanders was nothing but an uppity Mallard girl who believed the fiction she'd been told. 'You're so stupid,' Jude said. 'You don't even know what you are'" (Bennett, 2020, 268). That quote illustrates that Kennedy lacks a true sense of identity, or at the very least, that her identity is founded on a distorted perception of herself. The idiomatic expression "nothing but," which modifies the adjective "uppity," suggests that Kennedy's identity is grounded solely in her naivety. She adopts an identity that is not truly hers and remains unaware of it. The adjective "uppity" further implies that Kennedy's demeanor and personality do not align with her actual race. Kennedy, being Black, should not feel superior to Jude, who is also Black. Furthermore, Kennedy's ability to benefit from a social class she is not entitled to as a mixed-race character underscores that dissonance. The combination of the adjective "uppity" with the phrase "Mallard

girl" serves to reassert Kennedy's true identity. Through that, the narrator reveals who Kennedy truly is, though Kennedy herself remains oblivious to it. The narrator ceases the fiction: the narrator first deconstructs the fiction with the adjective "uppity," which highlights Kennedy's non-entitlement to the status of wealthy white girl; and then, the narrator reveals who Kennedy really is. The passive structure "who believed the fiction she'd been told" reflects Kennedy's naivety; the verb "believed" suggests that Kennedy never questioned or doubted what her mother told her, Kennedy simply accepted what she had been told as the truth and the reality. Kennedy's lack of criticism makes her appear passive and credulous, which is reinforced by her passive position.

Moreover, not only do Kennedy and Blake attend Stella's performance, but they also participate in it, as accessories. Marrying Blake is risky, because Stella is condemned to act white permanently. Her marriage with Blake is the aftermath of her occasional, then daily, passing performances. She used to pass as a game, and then for opportunities, but now her marriage with Blake forces her to perform constantly:

> That was the thrill of youth, the idea that you could be anyone. That was what had captured her in the charm shop, all those years ago. Then adulthood came, your choices solidifying, and you realize that everything you are had been set in motion years before. The rest was aftermath (Bennett, 2020, 240).

Stella's marriage with Blake is actually the accomplishment of her destiny. Although Stella sincerely loves Blake, and her marriage with him, her endless performance is the consequence of her younger self's choices. That quote suggests that, even though Stella has always desired to escape racism, and to access whites' privileges, she is trapped in her passing performance. Young Stella believed that she could be white if she wanted to, but she did not realize that being white for a shopping session and being white for life demanded entirely different levels of acting.

Stella's misjudgment was influenced by youth and by the city where she transformed. Stella started to pass as white in New Orleans – the city of *Mardi Gras*. Carnival is an event where class, gender and race lines are blurred. Mardi Gras is considered a heterotopia where identity can be dissimulated and recreated: "By facilitating dissimulation and flight through the creation of a new persona, carnival may reasonably be presented as a prime locus of 'the hidden transcripts' of social life" (Godet, 91). Mardi Gras is anchored in New Orleans's culture; in this regard, this city is a

symbol of rebirth and transformation, where hierarchies and identities can be redefined or reversed. Masked and costumed people at Mardi Gras indeed conceal their identity and create a new one for the duration of the carnival. Like Mardi Gras revelers, Stella defies societal constructs through the creation of her persona, as she covers her identity with artifices which contribute to the creation of her white identity. Yet Stella does not limit her persona to the sphere of the carnival, as she extends it beyond the carnival, into the actual society and her whole life – her passing performance is subversive. While the ephemeral nature of those revelers' persona makes their deception pleasant and unserious, Stella's permanent performance heightens the stakes significantly, and the consequences of an eventual unmasking are severe. In this respect, Stella is constantly afraid of being unmasked and has to suppress her true identity to maintain her persona in society.

Moreover, she failed to grasp that being unmasked would lead to serious consequences. If Blake discovers her secret, she will regress, because she will lose her status of white upper-class woman and return to her Black working-class woman position. Being a white man's wife confirms her whiteness to society, for even before her marriage with Blake, being associated with him was already a protection: "at Maison Blanche, she once overheard another associate refer to her as 'Blake's girl,' and she felt as if that distinction covered her even beyond the office building. As if just by venturing into the world as Blake's girl, she had been changed somehow" (Bennett, 2020, 198). The expression "Blake's girl" shows that belonging to a white man, indirectly gives Stella the status of white woman. The possessive form used to describe the relation between Blake and Stella, highlights Blake's dominant status as a white man in a white patriarchal society. In such a society, white men, and more specifically wealthy white men, like Blake, hold power. Having power provides reliability and enhances credibility, and since couples are not interracial during segregation, the woman that white Blake dates is necessarily white. That possessive relation actually gives Blake a protector's status: Stella is under Blake's protection, so Stella's whiteness is unquestionable; she is protected by his whiteness. In this regard, Blake adds credibility to Stella's white character and further reinforces her whiteness. If Blake is white, Stella is also white. Blake unconsciously covers Stella's secret.

b) Blake Sanders's Blindness as an Advantage in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

Nevertheless, despite his protective status, Stella's husband, Blake, is blind about Stella's Black ancestry. Contrary to Kennedy, Blake never questions Stella about her past or about her attitude: "He never understood why she averted her gaze when an old Negro woman shuffled past on the sidewalk, why she was always so curt with the elevator operators. She was jumpy around Negroes, like a child who'd been bit by a dog" (Bennett, 2020, 153–154). Despite his difficulty to understand Stella's reactions, Blake does not question her. The adverb "never" implies that he still does not know the reason. Those are just affirmative sentences, not questions, Blake only observes but never questions, he has all the clues to find out that Stella is actually Black, but he never understands. The interrogative adverb "why" is usually used at the beginning of a question; its purpose is to interrogate someone about the reason, and the cause for an action. Yet in that quote, that interrogative adverb does not function as a question word, but rather serves to highlight Blake's failure to grasp the reasons behind Stella's behavior and to question his wife's demeanor. Blake's passivity makes him a blind character. In this respect, Blake can be considered an oblivious observer, as he notices Stella's oddities but fails to understand the cause of her strange attitude. Blake can also be characterized as a complacent bystander, for he does not question her, and remains passive. Blake is actually ridiculed in the narrative because of his lack of awareness. Despite the clues, Blake remains blind, and does not perceive Stella's true identity:

> She told him that a dark girl, claiming to be a cousin, had cornered Kennedy after her play. She watched his face the entire time, waiting to see it change. A flicker of recognition, maybe. Relief that a question he'd always wondered had finally been answered. But he just scoffed, unbuttoning his dress shirt. "It's the Camaro," he said. "I'm sure she saw it and thought, boom. Payday" (Bennett, 2020, 274).

Blake's blindness is highlighted by Stella's expectations: she expected him to understand that she was passing. That quote suggests that Blake is blinded by his stereotypes; when Stella tells him about that encounter between their daughter and Jude, he immediately thinks that the Black girl is poor and tries to manipulate the wealthy white girl in order to steal from her. Blake's reaction confirms the idea that he is racist; that idea had already been suggested by his reaction after Stella's

intervention at the neighbors' meeting about the Black family's move in the neighborhood: "in all the time he'd known her, she'd never spoken kindly of a Negro. It embarrassed him a little, to tell the truth. He respected the natural order of things but you didn't have to be cruel about it" (Bennett, 2020, 153). For Blake, Black people are naturally inferior to white people, and his reaction to Stella's attitude is paradoxical, because he is as racist as he thinks Stella is. Blake's incapacity to see that reinforces the idea that he is blind. When he assumes that Jude approached Kennedy only for her status of wealthy white girl, he is being as racist as Stella, thus, his embarrassment about Stella's hatred of Black people is paradoxical.

The "natural order of things" refers to race hierarchy, where white people are above, and Black people are inferior. The fact that Blake has respect for that system is cruel too, because it is a racist system. Blake is not aware of his own racism and thinks that being friendly with a Black individual does not make him a racist: "as a boy, he'd had a colored nanny named Wilma who was practically family. He still sent her a Christmas card each year" (Bennett, 2020, 153). The narrator pokes fun at Blake's unconscious racism: there is a gap between the supposedly familial relation that him and his nanny had, and the action of sending a simple card once a year. Those two pieces of information are paradoxical. Sending a Christmas card alone does not establish a familial relationship, or even a relationship at all.

Their supposed connection appears to be more professional than familial, as Blake still treats his nanny like an employee. Despite their supposedly familial bond, the hierarchy that Blake referred to in the previous quote is evident here: he claims that Wilma was like a member of his family, but ultimately, she worked for him. Therefore, Blake is, in fact, racist, as he claims to consider Wilma a member of his family, yet there is a gap between his perception and his actions. He justifies his supposed lack of racism by considering Wilma as part of his family, but his behavior contradicts that claim. Wilma's skin color prevents Blake from treating her as a genuine member of his family, a fact he is entirely unaware of. Blake unconsciously assigns the same treatment to a Black family member as he would to an employee. Considering this, Blake is ridiculed like John Bellew is ridiculed in Larsen's *Passing*: those two racist white men have Black families and are not even aware of it.

Passing and Duality

Blake is a blind character; he may not be aware of his own ancestry. The name Blake may conceal the word "Black," as the removal of the letter 'e' makes Blake's name sound like the word 'Black.' His name may reflect his suppressed Blackness. When Blake was a child, he used to have a Black doll that his father tore apart:

> His father hated his son running around with a doll, a nigger doll at that, but Blake carried him everywhere, whispering all of his secrets into those plastic ears. This was a friend, someone who guarded your feelings behind that frozen red smile. Then one day, he stepped into the yard and saw clumps of cotton scattered all over the grass. On the dirt pathway, there was Jimbo, gutted, arms and legs strewn, his insides spilling out. The dog must've got to it, his father told him, but Blake always imagined him tossing that doll into the dog's snapping jaws. He'd knelt, picking up one of Jimbo's arms. He'd always wondered what the inside of the doll might look like. For some reason, he'd thought the cotton would be brown (Bennett, 2020, 202).

Children usually play with dolls which they identify with. In this regard, Blake may feel affection for that doll because he identifies with it – that unconscious identification could be race-related. The doll could function as a mirror of Blake's situation: Blake's white skin does not necessarily indicate that he is solely white. Additionally, Blake's curiosity about the doll's inner appearance implies that he questions the relation between outer appearance and inner nature – but it highlights his unawareness of his own inner nature. The fact that the black doll is associated with secrecy, may relate it to Blake's secret Black ancestry. The doll could have been white outside and black inside – representing Blake – but by choosing a black doll, Blake implicitly manifests his attraction to the Black race, and his potential identification with it. The white stuff inside the black doll surprises Blake, who was convinced that the doll's cotton would be black. His assumption justifies his blindness about Stella's Black nature. The hatred of Blake's father for that doll may reveal his hatred of Black individuals. Yet his attitude may not be solely justified by racism, but also by Blake's mother's potential deception. The suspicions of Blake's mother about Stella may suggest that, like Stella, Blake's mother may have been passing as white. The fact that his mother is the only one who finds some elements in Stella's life intriguing suggests that those are strategies that she may have employed herself to pass as white.[11] The destruction of the doll represents Blake's

[11] See p.133 of this thesis.

repression of his Black ancestry imposed on him by his father, and his father's forbiddance for Blackness. This idea is reinforced by the doll's "insides spilling out;" it may reveal his father's will to remove Blake's inner nature as a boy of mixed heritage.

Despite Blake's confusion regarding Stella's unusual behaviors and unexpected acts, Blake never tries to understand, he is naïve. For instance, he does not question Stella's intervention at the neighbors' meeting about the Black family's future moving: "Blake Sanders had been as surprised as anyone that his wife had spoken in that meeting. She wasn't one for demonstrating" (Bennett, 2020, 153). Despite Stella's unusual attitude, as well as Blake's surprise, the latter does not try to understand his wife's decision. Paradoxically, Blake is the one who knows his wife better among the neighbors, who were also surprised to see Stella intervening at the meeting, since Blake knows that "she wasn't one for demonstrating." Nevertheless, his surprise does not make room to curiosity, or even to questioning.

Furthermore, Stella is aware of Blake's blindness and strategically exploits it to ensure the success of her performance. Stella's strategy for keeping Blake unaware of her secret is manipulation. She carefully selects the information she shares with him, so that he believes she has nothing to hide. When Stella finds out that Jude is in contact with Kennedy, Stella hesitates to mention Jude to Blake. Yet she ends up telling him about Jude, for "she didn't want him to think that she had anything to hide, and she preferred him to hear the story from her" (Bennett, 2020, 273). Stella's strategy consists in manipulating Blake, and steering him away from the truth: that Stella indeed hides something from him. If Stella takes the decision to tell Blake about that story which involves her niece, that she wants to hide, Blake will never suspect the fact that that Black girl and his wife are actually related. Stella substitutes the truth: she hides some elements and produces another statement instead. In her work entitled *The Spectacle of the Secret*, Arielle Meyer studies the different ways to lie in order to protect a secret. Among those different ways to produce a lie, there is substitution:

> This substitution process is part of the dialectic of separation and confusion elaborated by Marin: putting away the masked identity necessitates blending into the opposing identity: separation demands confusion through a principle of permutation […] To hide difference, it is necessary to appear identical, identical to others whose identity differs.

> To hide, it is necessary to show, we could even say even more simply. Isolation is masked by the highlighting of another word, of something else.[12]

Stella indeed agrees with Blake and even pretends that she thinks like him. Stella is not the one who produces another statement, she simply imitates Blake and uses his statement in order to hide the truth: "she told him that a dark girl, claiming to be a cousin, had cornered Kennedy after her play […] 'It's the Camaro,' he said. 'I'm sure she saw it and thought, boom. Payday.' 'Exactly,' Stella said. 'That's exactly right. That's what I've been trying to tell her'" (Bennett, 2020, 274). By repeating Blake's statement, Stella implicitly produces a satisfactory answer for Blake, aligning with the mindset of a racist, wealthy white man. When Stella tells the story about Jude and Kennedy's encounter, Stella substitutes the truth by omitting key details and misrepresenting her opinion. While the event Stella narrates to Blake did occur and contains elements of truth, the omissions she introduces reshape the story to fit her intentions. Nevertheless, major elements are missing, like the fact that the "dark girl" she is referring to is actually her niece.

To hide her difference, Stella imitates Blake, her answer echoes Blake's answer. In order to mask the isolation of some elements in her story, Stella highlights the fact that she told Kennedy what Blake thinks and what Stella pretends to think. The fact that Stella supposedly told Kennedy the same thing before finding out that Blake thought the same, adds credibility to her lie. The action of telling Kennedy that Jude approached her for her Camaro indeed precedes the moment when Blake ventures the same hypothesis. It proves that she thought about the same cause by herself, she does not simply agree with Blake, but she pretends to be genuinely thinking the same. Stella wants to be the one to tell the story to Blake, so that she can choose her words and the information that she wants to share with Blake. Jude and Kennedy's encounter is an unexpected event in Stella's performance, and as a performer, Stella has to control unexpected events. Thus, controlling the story of that encounter allows Stella to keep control over the situation.

[12] My translation of : « Ce procédé de substitution s'inscrit bien dans la dialectique de la séparation et de la confusion élaborée par Marin : mettre à part l'identité masquée exige de se fondre dans l'identité adverse : la séparation réclame la confusion par un principe de permutation […] Pour cacher la différence, il faut se montrer identique, identique aux autres dont l'identité diffère. Pour cacher, il faut montrer, pourrions-nous dire plus simplement encore. La mise à l'écart est masquée par la mise en avant d'un autre mot, d'une autre chose. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret,* p.27.

c) From Props to Accomplices: Protecting the Secret, Consciously or Not

In addition, the ultimate proof of Stella's whiteness is genetics. Kennedy, Stella's daughter, looks white. She acts as a demonstration of her mother's whiteness. Kennedy is a prop which completes and reinforces Stella's costume and acting; Kennedy adds credibility to Stella's white character. Even if Kennedy is an actor in her mother's play, and is unaware of her role, she is also objectified in the narrative because of her function in her mother's play, as a prop: "Still, sometimes, Kennedy felt like a daughter who belonged to someone else, a child Stella was borrowing while she loaned a life that never should have been hers" (Bennett, 2020, 158). That quote highlights the objectification of Kennedy. The use of the verb "belonged" reduces Kennedy to an object, that notion of objectification is reinforced by the use of the verb "borrowing." Those two verbs suggest that Kennedy is someone's property, and that she is the object of a transaction between an owner and a loaner. Those two verbs are actually associated with the verb "loaned," which refers to Stella's life: Kennedy is a loan in a loaned life. In addition, Kennedy is estranged through the use of the determiner "a," instead of using the determiner "the." The determiner "a" conveys a detached tone, its use unfamiliarizes Kennedy in relation to Stella. That detachment actually dehumanizes Kennedy, who is described like an ordinary property, and like a simple accessory for Stella.

However, Kennedy's status evolves throughout the narrative, along with her awareness of Stella's passing: before being aware of her mother's passing, Kennedy serves as a prop reinforcing Stella's white character; then, when Kennedy finds out about her mother's passing, Kennedy becomes an actress in Stella's play. The difference between her two positions is her level of awareness. Since Kennedy looks white, that she has white parents, and that she is raised like a white girl, the latter never doubts her whiteness. Not only does Kennedy confirm Stella's whiteness in the eyes of the latter's audience, but also in the eyes of Blake. Like her mother, Kennedy Sanders plays a role. Yet unlike Stella, Kennedy is unaware of her acting, she acts like the person she thinks to be: a white upper-class teenager. In their article "Negro Passing: To Pass or Not to Pass," the scholars James E. Conyers and T. H. Kennedy examine the reasons why some Black individuals choose to pass as white. They analyze the responses to questionnaires on this topic, which were completed by both white and Black participants. Additionally, they explore the reasons why some

Black individuals with light skin refuse to pass as white. The authors further argue that some African Americans, like Kennedy, might be passing unintentionally: "unintentional passing refers to Negroes who are identified as white without initiative being taken by them to conceal their racial identity" (Conyers & Kennedy, 215). Since Kennedy embodies the person she believes herself to be, rather than who she truly is, Kennedy is an actor. Yet she is unaware of it, Kennedy passes as white, just like her mother, and because of her mother. Not only does Stella compel Kennedy to contribute to her passing performance as a *prop* and as a proof of her whiteness, but she also compels Kennedy to pass.

By concealing her own Black racial heritage, Stella deprives her daughter of the knowledge of her heritage, effectively making the decision for Kennedy to conceal her Black identity as well. When Kennedy discovers her unintentional passing, she is determined to reclaim control over her racial identity – agency she had been deprived of throughout her life. Paradoxically, although Kennedy has always identified as white because Stella has always identified as such, Kennedy keeps identifying as white after she finds out about her unintentional passing despite her will to have control over her racial identity. Even more paradoxically, she also rejects her Black heritage on the pretext that Jude deprived her of the initiative to identify herself as Black, by identifying her as such: "She just hated the idea of anyone telling her who she had to be. She was like her mother in that way. If she'd been born Black, she would have been perfectly happy about it" (Bennett, 2020, 314–315). Kennedy's refusal to identify as a Black woman stems solely from Jude's intervention, as implied by the adverb "just." She justifies that idea by stating that she would have rejected her white ancestry if she had been born Black. By considering the reversed situation, Kennedy rejects the idea that she is racist and underscores that point with the adverb "perfectly," which illustrates that her rejection of her Black ancestry is not rooted in race, but in agency. Now that Kennedy shares Stella's secret, she understands her mother better and even becomes aware of their similarities as she admits that "she was like her mother in that way." Nonetheless, Kennedy's specification that they are similar in "that way" suggests that Kennedy is not aware that she is like her mother on multiple levels, and more specifically because of their shared acting skills

Although they share a common talent, Stella desires Kennedy to be her opposite rather than her double. Stella wants to preserve her daughter, so she wants her to have the life that she never had as a Black working-class teenager. However, "the daughter is characteristically identified by

the mother as her continuation or double" (Martínez Reventós, 287), Stella unconsciously turns Kennedy into her double and the continuation of her white character. Kennedy is indeed an actor by profession, and in spite of her mother's disapproval, Stella may be the one who unconsciously shaped her into becoming an actor. Ever since childhood, Kennedy has embodied the role of the wealthy white girl, but since she is not really white, Kennedy just plays that role. Stella's disapproval of her passion for acting is actually paradoxical, since Stella is the one who made her an actor. Kennedy just unconsciously followed the path that her mother imposed on her at birth. Stella wants her daughter to be free but she is the one who controls Kennedy's life, and who deprives her of the knowledge about her ancestry.

Stella does not want to identify her daughter as her double, she wants the opposite for her: "'I've always been this way,' Stella said. 'I'm not like you. Open. It's a good way to be. I hope you stay that way'" (Bennett, 2020, 278). Stella dissociates herself from her daughter and underscores that the two are different. She also encourages that difference between them, by expressing her hope that Kennedy remains "open," implicitly revealing Stella's desire for her daughter to avoid a life of secrecy and lies like her own. The adjective "open" has an implied meaning for Stella, as it refers to honesty for her: Stella cannot be open like her daughter because she has a secret, and in order to protect it, she cannot reveal too much about her past life. That adjective is framed by the sentences "I'm not like you" and "It's a good way to be," which stress Stella's rejection of Kennedy as her double, and may also express her regret. Through her desire for her daughter not to live a life similar to hers, Stella may also partly regret the path that she chose for herself – or at least the path her younger self chose for her – as she suggests that she is now living with the consequences of young Stella's decisions. Moreover, the fact that Stella has "always been this way" suggests that she was destined to live a life of secrecy, whereas Kennedy's personality does not destine her to such a life; their opposite personalities justify Stella's hopes for her daughter.

However, Kennedy is like her mother and creates a fictional life. When Kennedy finds out about her mother's lies, the line between reality and fiction is blurred. Consequently, creating a fictional life feels to Kennedy like a natural extension of her existence prior to discovering the truth. After finding out about the fiction created by her mother, Kennedy no longer knows who she is, so she leaves in order to find herself – her true self – but she paradoxically creates fictional characters to find that self:

> All the stories she knew were fiction, so she began to create new ones. She was the daughter of a doctor, an actor, a baseball player. She was taking a break from medical school. She had a boyfriend back home named Reese. She was white, she was Black, she became a new person as soon as she crossed a border. She was always inventing her life (Bennett, 2020, 317).

Like her mother, Kennedy incorporates true elements into her fiction, and transforms them to create another story. She indeed plays the role of an actor's daughter. Even though the name of the actor is not mentioned, Kennedy probably refers to her own mother, since the latter played the role of a white woman for the major part of her life. That permanent role certainly earns Stella the status of an actor. Moreover, Kennedy mentions Reese, but redefines their link, she assigns Reese another role in her life as he no longer is her cousin's boyfriend. In that story, Reese is Kennedy's boyfriend. In this regard, one can wonder if Kennedy is playing the role of Jude, or if she imitates Jude in order to be able to embody a Black woman. When Kennedy embodies the role of a doctor's daughter or a medical student, she may implicitly embody Jude.

Not only does Kennedy navigate different characters, but she also navigates races with fluidity, as demonstrated by the anaphoristic accumulation "she was white, she was Black, she became a new person as soon as she crossed a border." The verb "was" suggests that she did not merely play the role of white or Black characters, but actually became both white and Black herself. Furthermore, the separation of each clause by a comma creates a rhythm which underscores the fluidity of Kennedy's transformations. Like Stella, Kennedy uses other characters in order to add credibility to her fiction, those characters serve to prove the veracity of her stories. Mentioning names adds a tangible dimension to the story. The different places she travels to give the ability to embody a different persona; here, the border functions as a curtain: when Kennedy crosses a border, she lifts the curtain on a new play and draws it closed on the preceding one. When she visits a new country, not only does she perform on a new stage, with a new setting, but she also performs for a new audience.

Kennedy's life is portrayed as a succession of fictions, as the past continuous tense in "she was always inventing her life" implies that embodying different characters was a habit for her, she was accustomed to embodying different characters. That idea is further reinforced by the accumulation "she was the daughter of a doctor, an actor, a baseball player." The rhythm created

by this listing mirrors Kennedy's constant shifts in identity, emphasizing the diversity and fluidity of the characters she embodied. These constant shifts are further emphasized by the anaphoristic structure of the quote: the repetition of "she was" at the beginning of each clause highlights the various personas she embodied. That structure underscores not only the roles she embodied, but also the idea that she fully transformed into those characters. The verb "became" reinforces that notion, which suggests a more profound change where she did not simply play those roles but fully became the identities she created. Therefore, Kennedy leaves to escape her mother's fiction, but paradoxically to end up reproducing it herself.

Furthermore, in Larsen's *Passing*, even if Clare is a good actor, she also uses her husband and their daughter as accessories for her white character; they reinforce and prove her whiteness. Even though Clare's demeanor jeopardizes her secret, she can still rely on her family and her late white aunts to authenticate her whiteness. Her daughter even serves as a protection: "And there's a child. That's a certain security." (Larsen, 1929, 48). The child serves as a security because she confirms her mother's supposed whiteness through her own whiteness; she is like a living proof of Clare's whiteness. Moreover, Clare's husband, John Bellew, is a racist white man. As such, he is not expected to marry a Black woman, he is expected to marry a white woman instead. Thus, for Clare, marrying John Bellew confirms her whiteness in the eyes of society: by marrying Clare, John implicitly claims that he identifies Clare as a white woman.

Society can indeed trust John's judgment, because he is intimate with Clare, it means that he has already seen Clare's naked body. Clothes contribute to the success of Clare's performance, it contributes to the masquerade, and make her ambiguous body appear white: "Irene's and Clare's performance of a certain type of femininity, with fashion as their costumes and middle-class etiquette as their stage directions, helps the women to accentuate the ambiguous visual demarcations of the African American, light-skinned body and enables them to pass as white more successfully" (Thaggert, 4). Irene's and Clare's bodies are their instruments that they perform in order to make it look white. Like the Vignes twins, both Irene and Clare possess an ambiguous physical appearance, their body could be both a Black body and a white body. What makes their body belong to one race or the other, is the way the body is performed and staged: clothes and demeanor highlight the whiteness of the body. Those elements are essential in the performance of the white character, as they create the masquerade.

Moreover, clothes are like an armor: clothes cover the body, and make it appear white. Like for Stella, marriage confirms the success of Clare's passing, as her intimacy with her husband forces Clare to remove that armor. In this regard, nakedness is like a test, because the body is exposed and whiteness cannot be performed; the whiteness of the body relies on its color and on the perception of the character who sees the naked body. When John marries Clare, he implicitly confirms that Clare is white; she implicitly passes the test of whiteness. In Clare and John's intimacy, John is a judge for that test, without even being aware of it, as he perceives every part of Clare's body as white, which confirms her whiteness.

The naked body has already been used as a tool to denounce the passing practice or to prove the impossible passing in the US racial history, like during Alice Jones Rhinelander's trial. That case opposed working-class Alice Jones Rhinelander, the daughter of a white woman and of a mixed ancestry man, and Kip Rhinelander, a wealthy white man. Alice and Kip married in secret, but since Kip Rhinelander was quite famous, because of his family's Real Estate Company, the media learned about the secret marriage and decided to investigate Alice Jones Rhinelander for their article. However, the media found out that Alice's father is a 'mulatto' and published about it. Due to threats from Kip's father, some newspapers focused on the couple's different social backgrounds, rather than mentioning the interracial nature of their relationship. After the revelations about Alice's ancestry, Kip's family forced him to divorce and to sign a document which had been written by the family's lawyers, which stated that Alice Jones Rhinelander was passing as white and then deceived Kip Rhinelander. In order to prove that Kip knew that Alice had a Black heritage, the latter showed parts of her body which revealed her Blackness during the trial – like her breasts. Not only did Kip see those portions of Alice's body as her lover, but their epistolary relationship confirmed that fact, for some letters described some moments of the couple's intimacy. In that case, Alice's body bore the marks of her Black ancestry and proved that she could not pass as white to her husband.

After Irene's and John's encounter, the one which allowed John to discover Clare's secret, Irene thinks about the potential consequences of that discovery. Irene thinks that one of the consequences would be a divorce: "What if Bellew should divorce Clare? Could he? There was the Rhinelander case" (Larsen, 1929, 122). In that quote, it is suggested that the Rhinelander case could potentially be reenacted by Clare and John: John would have to prove that he did not know that

Clare was Black when he married her, but contrary to Alice Jones Rhinelander, Clare could not use her body to prove her Black ancestry as it does not bear the marks of her Blackness, and she could not claim that John knew about her mixed ancestry because he did not. The mention of that case answers Irene's rhetorical questions: John could divorce Clare as the Rhinelander demonstrates. However, the parallel with the Rhinelander case can also imply that if John took Clare to court, the latter could not win like Alice Jones Rhinelander, who won the trial against Kip Rhinelander, for Clare actually deceived John.

Despite their personal decisions to pass as white, the passing characters Stella and Clare rely on certain members of their audience to lend credibility to their passing performances. The success of their passing depends not only on their ability to appear white but also on the cooperation of the white characters, even if those characters are unaware of their involvement. Their secret is protected not only by the white characters, who unconsciously participate in the passing performance, but also by those who are aware of the passing characters' true identity and choose to play along. Kennedy, Irene, and Gertrude actively contribute to the success of Stella's and Clare's performances. Although John discovers Clare's secret following his encounter with Irene and her Black friend, that revelation stems not from Irene's actions, but from Clare's merging of her past and current lives. Even if Clare attempts to challenge traditional passing, she faces the same risk of being unmasked as the other passing characters and enduring the consequences of passing.

II) Risks and Consequences of Passing

1) Loss

In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and in Larsen's *Passing*, a pattern emerges in which the passing character is associated with a black character, with whom they form a duo. In Morrison's "Recitatif," the pattern differs slightly, for neither of the characters is actually passing; one of them is actually white and is associated with the black character. In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, Stella Vignes is associated with Desiree Vignes – her twin sister, and with Loretta Walker – her black neighbor. In Larsen's *Passing*, Clare Kendry is associated with Irene Redfield. In Morrison's "Recitatif," Twyla and Roberta are associated with each other. Even though the passing or white character, in each work, is associated with a black character, Stella stands out as the only passing character who forms a duo with multiple black characters. That plurality and that inconsistency in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* suggest that the threat of being unmasked is not singular but multifaceted.

Stella's association with Desiree also explores the themes of incompleteness and complementarity through the symbol of twin sisters. Their duo contrasts with the other ones which rely on rivalry and opposition.

a) Deprivation of Individuality

In Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, Stella and Desiree Vignes form a duo throughout the whole novel. Before their separation, they are referred to as a pair; and after Stella's departure, they are still linked together through their status of twin sisters. They are also implicitly linked by their

respective choices which break with the traditions of their hometown – Mallard. Stella and Desiree are intrinsically linked by the fact that they are twin sisters. Duality is at the core of their relationship and of their identity as they were born as a pair, and each of them represents the half of that pair. That notion of pair is implicitly conveyed by the title of the novel through the use of the noun "half."

That title actually refers to different people or themes depending on the perspective. Even though the title obviously refers to Stella, who vanished in New Orleans, and left her twin sister, the "vanishing half" may also refer to ancestry from Stella's perspective. Stella and Kennedy indeed renounce one half of their ancestry, unconsciously or not. It can also refer to Desiree who renounces to her white ancestry when she chooses to identify as black and to reject Mallard's colorism. Moreover, the use of the -ing form in the title *The Vanishing Half* implies that the process of disappearance is not finished – it is still ongoing. The personification in the title also aligns with the characters' desire for agency as the title implies that the "half" actively vanishes. The title implies that all the characters are divided into two. Yet they are described as complementary, which suggests that their own identity is not complete. In this regard, they need to be two to exist. Desiree Vignes embodies social presence, not only for herself, but also for her twin, Stella, who remains in retreat. Desiree is the twin who speaks and Stella is the twin who listens: "She [Stella] was the only person Desiree ever shared her secrets with. […] Stella listened, sometimes judged, but never told" (Bennett, 2020, 15). The twins' relationship is balanced because each of them has one role which complements the other's role: Desiree, the extrovert twin, is the speaker and Stella, the introvert twin, is the listener. Stella can be perceived as the extension of Desiree since the latter shares her secrets with Stella exclusively, who keeps them to herself as if Desiree's secrets were hers, even though a secret is not supposed to be shared. The idea that Stella could be the extension of Desiree is reintroduced by the fact that Desiree enjoys embodying Stella:

> "Which one are you again?" He'd ask.
>
> "Stella," she sometimes told him, just for fun.
>
> […]
>
> Desiree had spent years studying Stella. The way she played with her hem, how she tucked her hair behind her ear or gazed up hesitantly before saying hello. She could

> mirror her sister, mimic her voice, inhabit her body in her own. She felt special, knowing that she could pretend to be Stella but Stella could never be her (Bennett, 2020, 14).

The twins do not switch places, only Desiree embodies her twin sister. The gradation in embodiment in "she could mirror her sister, mimic her voice, inhabit her body in her own" reflects the process through which Desiree went to embody her sister. The verb "mirror" implies that Desiree and Stella are two distinct bodies. The verb "mimic" suggests that Desiree can perfectly imitate Stella's voice and that she intends to copy Stella's voice, whereas the verb "inhabit" creates a rupture with the imitation process. The verb "inhabit" suggests that Desiree becomes Stella, and it also creates a rupture with the notion of duality to align with the notion of unity. Moreover, embodying Stella seems natural and recreational for Desiree, as she does it many times and "for fun." When Desiree embodies Stella, she breaks the duality and considers Stella as a choice among the persons she can be – she can be either Desiree or Stella. Additionally, Desiree perceives her capacity to embody the two members of their pair as a privilege, for Stella cannot and refuses to switch places. In this respect, even though Desiree can embody her twin sister, she needs Stella more than Stella needs her because Desiree relies on Stella for inspiration since "Desiree had spent years studying Stella."

Moreover, Stella and Desiree are identical twin sisters. Their resemblance gives the impression that they are the same person with two distinct bodies: "Unnerving, Bernice thought, glancing between the girls. Like sewing a dress for one person split into two bodies" (Bennett, 2020, 37). That quote emphasizes the resemblance between the twin sisters. The comparison "like sewing a dress for one person split into two bodies" indeed suggests that Stella and Desiree seem to be clones of each other, for one of them is implicitly described as being the reproduction of the other.

That comparison also reinforces the twins' complementarity, since they both are the half of one body as the verb "split into" suggests. That comparison draws a parallel between the Vignes twins and Zeus's twins, Castor and Pollux (Kastor and Polydeukes), from Greek mythology. The Castor and Pollux twins can be perceived as either opposite or complementary, for Castor is mortal and Pollux is immortal. That discrepancy can be explained by the fact that the twins have different fathers: Castor's father is a mortal, named Tyndareus, whereas Pollux's father is the god Zeus. Yet

they have the same mother, Leda. Despite their different natures, the twins, known as the Dioscuri, were veritably close. Their profound bond made them complementary, for when Castor died on the battle field, Pollux begged Zeus to let him share his immortality with his twin brother to be reunited. Instead of simply making Castor immortal, Zeus offered the twins a compromise: they could remain together but they had to alternate between the Underworld and Mount Olympus. That arrangement enabled them to maintain the balance between life and death, between mortality and immortality, while remaining together. Later, in order to ensure the twins' eternal bond and to make sure that they would never be separated again, Zeus placed them in the sky as the Gemini constellation, which represents duality and eternal unity.

In her article "Splitting Heirs: Reforming the Custodial Treatment of Identical Twins in Divorce," Erin K. McBride studies the separation of twins in divorce custody cases. To introduce her analysis on the relationship between twins, she refers to the myth of Castor and Pollux and she states that they "were inseparable since birth, and would never act without consulting each other" (McBride, 515). That quote can also characterize the Vignes twins' relationship in Mallard. Before Stella's departure, the twins were indeed inseparable and would do everything together: "But she couldn't go without Stella. She'd never been without her sister and part of her wondered if she could survive the separation" (Bennett, 2020, 14). In that passage, Desiree shares her intentions to leave Mallard with Stella, for she does not want to have any secrets for her twin sister, and most importantly, to leave without her. The modal "could" in the negative structure emphasizes the impossibility for Desiree to abandon her sister. The adverb "never" in the clause "she'd never been without her sister" underscores the twins' inseparability, as it suggests that the twins never ceased to be together. Moreover, that idea is reinforced by Desiree's internal interrogation as she thinks about her reaction to the twins' separation. The fact that she reflects on that implies that the twins never separated before, they are unfamiliar with separation.

Thanks to her analysis of the Gemini twins, McBride provides an analysis of twins in real life and claims that "the strength and uncanny quality of the relationship between twins implies they share a soul and a mind, and in reality, there is just one person accidentally placed in two bodies" (McBride, 516). That image of twins strongly echoes the image in the comparison "like sewing a dress for one person split into two bodies." McBride's image also emphasizes the identicality of the twins as well as their unity. Twins are so similar and unified that their existence

as two distinct persons is described as an accident, which implies that twins are meant to be the same person and to share a single mind. Yet the notion of "accident" has a negative connotation as it suggests that their division into two bodies was both unexpected and unintended – an error rather than a natural occurrence.

Despite the coincidental existence of twins, their unity is described as a "quality." In this regard, twins are meant to remain together rather than split, as they share one soul and one mind, which binds them. Therefore, the twins' separation can be perceived as either unnatural or as a break from the traditional image and relationship of twins. Stella and Desiree's separation marks their individuality, as they no longer share one mind and one soul, they grow apart, becoming opposites. Stella and Desiree's twinship may serve as a redefinition of tradition: two souls, two minds, for two distinct bodies. While Pollux gives up his life to be with his twin brother, Stella does the opposite, as she abandons her twin sister to pursue her own life.

The idea that Stella and Desiree's separation can be perceived as a break from tradition is further reinforced: "Throughout their lives, the twin relationship is characterized as closer than any other human relationship, including marriage, and creates the impression that twins don't need anyone but each other. Adult twins often maintain daily, even hourly contact with each other, if they have decided not to remain living together" (McBride, 518–519). That quote demonstrates that the Vignes twins' relationship contrasts with traditional twinship, since Stella and Desiree are the most distant characters in the narrative. Moreover, in Stella's case, her marriage represents the most important relationship in her passing journey as it is the reason why she started to pass as white permanently, and her husband confirms her whiteness. In this respect, Stella is closer to her husband than she is to her twin sister, and her relationship with her husband is more essential than her relationship with her twin sister in her passing journey. Moreover, instead of maintaining daily contact, the twins no longer communicate with each other. Although the twins' separation is not the result of a divorce, it is nonetheless the consequence of a disagreement – a desire to follow different paths.

b) Loss of the Other Half in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

The twins' departure from Mallard marked the beginning of their lives as full characters – they became two distinct individuals. Their opposite choices and lifestyles reflect the reappropriation of their identities as individuals and no longer as the other half of a pair. Yet their differences were already perceivable before their departure: "As they grew, they no longer seemed like one body split in two, but two bodies poured into one, each pulling it her own way" (Bennett, 2020, 38). That quote contrasts with the idea developed by McBride, that twins share one mind, and one soul. It also contrasts with the idea that Desiree and Stella have the same body split in two. Their growth seems to reverse the process: they no longer are the same person with two distinct bodies, they are now two different persons with the same body. Moreover, the verb "poured" suggests that the twins have been constrained to be twins, for the verb is in a passive form which implies that their twinship is not their choice. Nevertheless, they reappropriate their individuality while pursuing their own path: Stella passes as white and Desiree does not. Their difference lies in their juxtaposition, as Maaike Siemes explains in her article "Defying the Binaries of Passing in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*":

> Throughout the novel, the twins are juxtaposed in Stella's decision to pass as white and Desiree's decision not to pass. This juxtaposition highlights the extent to which Stella's act is a consequence of her internalization of colorism, a form of discrimination in which people with a lighter skin tone are treated more favorably than people with a darker skin tone. Colorism preserves whiteness as the ideal of beauty and upholds a social hierarchy based on race (Siemes, 150).

Stella and Desiree are separated by their different aspirations and more specifically by Stella's decision to pass as white – to perpetuate the tradition of Mallard. Even though the twins are complementary before their departure from Mallard, that complementarity actually foreshadows their opposition. Desiree has always dreamed of leaving Mallard while Stella has always imagined herself remaining in Mallard: "Stella wanted to become a schoolteacher at Mallard High someday. But every time Desiree imagined her own future in Mallard, life carrying on forever as it always

had, she felt something clawing at her throat" (Bennett, 2020, 10). The twins' desire to remain in Mallard or not, aligns with their internalized ideology: Stella was meant to perpetuate Mallard's colorism as she dreamed of spending her life in Mallard, whereas Desiree was meant to rebel against Mallard's ideology, since she wanted to escape the town. Stella's desire to remain in Mallard implicitly reveals her internalization of colorism which is expressed when she passes as white. During her passing performance, Stella implicitly reproduces Mallard's history as she associates whiteness to success in society, and also rejects black people, like Loretta Walker. Stella's aspiration to become a teacher underscores her internalization of Mallard's standards and traditions, because she would be positioned as a transmitter. Teaching in Mallard would involve conveying the town's ideologies, and perpetuate its norms and values. Unlike Stella, Desiree rejects the perspective of a life in Mallard, the reaction that this idea provokes within her demonstrates her hatred of Mallard. The image "she [Desiree] felt something clawing at her throat" suggests that not only is this prospect painful, but it also deprives Desiree of her voice. Without her voice, Desiree cannot assert her identity, and be her true self. Mallard appears to suppress Desiree's values and identity, for she does not internalize white ideals like the other inhabitants, rather, she rejects the line separating dark-skinned Black individuals and the Mallard inhabitants. She refuses to belong and to perpetuate the traditions.

As I explained in "Navigating Races," Stella had to leave Desiree behind in order to pursue her white life. Despite her will to live a white life, her decision still haunts her throughout the novel as she still imagines what her life would have been with her twin sister: "if she was still in Mallard, she would be amused by all the ways that they [Kennedy and Stella] were different. By all the ways her daughter reminded her of Desiree, even – she might laugh with her sister about it. Are you sure she's not yours? But here in this world, her daughter felt like a stranger and it terrified her" (Bennett, 2020, 245). The conditional structure introduced by the clause "if she was still in Mallard" reveals the way Stella imagines her life in Mallard with Desiree, if she had not rejected her. That structure underscores Stella's regret over her decision, and reflects how much Desiree still impacts her life. Stella imagines a life where her white life and her black life coexist: Stella can even associate Kennedy with Desiree who respectively represent the two sides of Stella's life. Yet that scenario is not achievable and remains a hypothesis, as suggested by the modal verbs "would" and "might" which convey uncertainty and potentiality. In that quote, Mallard is

considered another world, because a contrast is set between Mallard and Stella's passing life which is referred to as "this world." The conjunction "but" suggests a return to "this world" – to her reality – as the conjunction creates an opposition with Stella's imagined life. The adverb "here" also connects Stella to "this world," for it suggests that Stella is physically present in that "world," and is not in rupture with that locus. The conjunction "but" also has a negative connotation, and implies that her reality is less pleasant than her imagined life. It likely suggests Stella's disappointment and deception regarding the impossibility for her to live that imagined life.

In addition, Stella would be amused by the differences between her and Kennedy exclusively in Mallard. Those differences would be compensated by Kennedy's resemblance with Desiree. In this regard, Stella misses the complementarity that Desiree brings to her life. That complementarity is emphasized by the repetition of the clause "by all the ways" which creates rhythm and draws a parallel between Stella and Kennedy's opposition and Desiree and Kennedy's resemblance. It suggests that Desiree is the extension, and continuation of Stella, which justifies the amusement. Yet Stella is terrified by her differences with Kennedy, since those differences cannot be compensated by Desiree and Kennedy's similarities. Desiree and Kennedy cannot coexist in Stella's passing life – in "this world."

In addition, despite their separation, the twins continue to communicate indirectly. Just as Stella implicitly asks her sister, "Are you sure she's not yours?", Desiree also mentally addresses Stella despite the physical distance: "What now, she asked Stella in her head. Where do I go?" (Bennett, 2020, 18). Even though their questions are directed at their twin sister, their communication remains indirect, as they do not verbalize those questions to one another. As the narrator states, Desiree "asked Stella in her head," which suggests that while they mentally interrogate their sister, they remain conscious of her absence and do not expect an answer. Furthermore, the absence of direct speech reinforces the idea that those questions are not explicitly asked, but rather function as rhetorical devices, which emphasize their bond. Desiree's question also underscores the twins' complementarity, as she instinctively expects her sister to possess the answer to her question. Moreover, as seen previously, twins are perceived as two halves of one body. In this respect, the Vignes twins could be talking to themselves, the other twin being the extension of their selves.

Furthermore, despite her decision, Stella is still nostalgic about the past. Her emotions lead her to make a mistake as she implicitly includes herself in the pair that she formed with Desiree: "We were always on top of each other –" (Bennett, 2020, 277). That quote has a double meaning – for both Kennedy and Stella, the latter is referring to the twins' apartment-share, yet for Stella only, her comment also describes the twins' relationship. The pronoun "we" unites Desiree and Stella and pairs them up. They are no longer two distinct individuals but they now form a whole through that pronoun. However, the pronoun "we" is associated with the verb "be" in the past tense, which implies that their pair no longer exists. The past tense creates a rupture between Stella's passing life and the time when the pair still existed. In addition, the association of the adverb "always" with the prepositional phrase "on top of each other" underscores the twins' indivisibility. Moreover, the dash suggests that Kennedy interrupts Stella with her question "Who was?" which reveals Stella's mistake. It was the first time that Stella ever referred to Desiree, even implicitly, and referred to their pair since Kennedy does not know who the other half of that pair designated as "we" is, as suggested by the interrogative pronoun "who."

Moreover, Desiree seems to be more independent than Stella, and seems to be more inclined to pursue a path of her own as she dreams of leaving Mallard, unlike Stella. Yet the latter is actually the twin who pursues her own path. The narrative highlights Desiree's fear of being abandoned by her twin sister, but not the other way around: "The thought had always terrified Desiree, Stella moving to Atlanta or D.C. without her. A small part of her felt relieved; now Stella couldn't not possibly leave her behind" (Bennett, 2020, 11). Desiree's perspective shows her fear of being separated from her twin sister as emphasized by the verb "terrified." The verb "terrified" is further reinforced by the adverb "always" which stresses Desiree's constant and permanent fear. In addition, the clause "Stella moving to Atlanta or D.C. without her" is framed by a comma and a period. That frame highlights Desiree's dread as it reveals the object of that dread. Desiree fears of being abandoned by Stella, that idea is emphasized by the prepositional phrase "without her" which is also framed by two periods. The use of a frame within a frame reveals Desiree's fright of being separated from her twin sister, and emphasizes her ultimate fear: being abandoned by Stella. Additionally, Desiree's worry is perpetual, as only "a small part of her felt relieved" upon learning that Stella would not go to college. That suggests that, for Desiree, although Stella did not abandon

her this time, it does not guarantee that she never will. Desiree's partial relief serves as a form of foreshadowing, which implies that Stella will ultimately abandon her.

However, even though Stella is not aware of it yet, Desiree also is the extension of her. She realizes their unity once she separates from her twin sister:

> In New Orleans, Stella split in two. She didn't notice it at first because she'd been two people her whole life: she was herself and she was Desiree. The twins, beautiful and rare, were never called the girls, only the twins, as if it were a formal title. She'd always thought of herself as part of this pair, but in New Orleans, she splintered into a new woman altogether after she got fired from Dixie Laundry (Bennett, 2020, 193).

Stella unconsciously normalized their unity because Stella and Desiree have always been identified and referred to as "the twins." Through this title, Stella and Desiree are defined solely by their twinhood, they are deprived of their individuality. Despite their duality through their twinhood and the fact that Stella has been two people her whole life, unity prevails as it suggests that they merged with each other. Now that they split, Stella can be aware of that unity and live an actual dual life after the creation of her white persona. Her passage in New Orleans allows Stella to extend her existence beyond the pair formed by her and Desiree, and to construct her life as a full person, and no longer as the half of a pair. The first and the ultimate sentences of that quote describe Stella's process to reappropriate her individuality through the creation of her white character. The verbs "split" and "splintered" reveal that Stella reiterated the process of separation, as she first separated from Desiree, and then she left out her Black ancestry for her white ancestry to prevail. Through those repeated acts of separation, Stella embraces both individuality and a white identity. After realizing that she was both herself and Desiree, Stella distanced herself – metaphorically and physically – from her twin sister, then transformed into a white woman. She rejected her merged identity as one half of a pair in pursuit of individuality. While rejecting that twinship, Stella also rejected her black identity, which allowed her to transform into a white individual. In this regard, Desiree is considered a burden in Stella's pursuit of her own life.

Moreover, the city where Stella became aware of that unity seems essential as the name of the city, New Orleans, is repeated twice, which highlights its importance in Stella's transformation. The first sentence "in New Orleans, Stella split in two," contains an alliteration with the repetition

of the /s/ sound. The /s/ sound is found in the words “Orleans,” “Stella,” and “split” which respectively draw attention to the place of the transformation, to the person who is undergoing transformation, and to the nature of the transformation. Therefore, the alliteration implicitly describes Stella’s transformation by stressing the link between those three words. The name of the city New Orleans contains the adjective “new” which suggests a renewal, a new start. As I explained in the previous chapter of this thesis, New Orleans is the city of *Mardi Gras,* a symbol of rebirth and transformation.

c) Reenacting the Loss of the Other Half in Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half*

Furthermore, in Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half*, Stella also forms a duo with Loretta Walker, her black neighbor in her passing life. While Stella first formed a pair with Desiree, and then rejected her, the process is reversed with the pair formed by Stella and Loretta. Stella indeed used to reject Loretta and to keep her distance with her before forming a duo with her. This rejection of Loretta reflects Stella’s worries and fears of being unmasked and then to be deprived of her individuality as a white woman.

Stella Vignes is a performer, the characters for whom she passes are members of her audience. However, when Loretta Walker moves in her neighborhood, the latter is a spectacle for Stella, and Stella becomes a spectator to that performance. The shift in the dynamic between them underscores the threat that Loretta is for Stella’s secret. Loretta implicitly deprives Stella of control since the latter no longer dominates the narrative. Moreover, when Stella observes Loretta, Stella observes the Black woman that she could have been:

> From her bedroom window, Stella peered through the blinds as the van parked in front of the Lawson’s house. Three lanky colored men climbed out the back in matching purple shirts. One by one, they unloaded a leather couch; a marble vase; a long, furled

> rug; a giant stone elephant with a flared trunk; a slender floor lamp. An endless parade of furniture and no family in sight (Bennett, 2020, 167).

Stella is positioned as a spectator. Stella seems to watch a TV show, the "bedroom window" functions as the television screen. The verbs related to sight "peered" and "watched," reinforce the idea that Stella is watching a show. Stella observes the beginning of the show since the arrival of the van corresponds to the arrival of the main characters in the show, the setting is being installed. The accumulation "they unloaded a leather couch; a marble vase; a long, furled rug; a giant stone elephant with a flared trunk; a slender floor lamp" creates rhythm, which imitates the rhythm of the installation of the setting. The specificity of the description demonstrates that Stella watches, but also observes. Nevertheless, Stella is not supposed to attend that performance, as she hides behind the window and the blinds. Stella is not satisfied by the show, for she could not see the main characters, the ones she was looking for – the Walkers. The adjective "endless" reflects Stella's impatience, that adjective also contrasts with the determiner "no" which highlights the absence of the family; the contrast reveals Stella's disappointment. The idea that Stella attends a performance is developed:

> Through her blinds, she watched the Walkers as if their lives were another program on her television set. But she never saw anything alarming until the morning when she spotted her daughter playing dolls in the cul-de-sac with the Walker girl. There was no time to think. Before she knew it, she'd stormed across the street and grabbed her daughter's arm, both girls gaping as she dragged Kennedy back into the house (Bennett, 2020, 173).

The comparison with a television show is explicitly set as shown by the comparative tool "as." Once again, Stella spies on the Walkers, she is still observing Loretta. The fact that Stella "never saw anything alarming" suggests that Stella is keeping Loretta under surveillance, and that the result of her observation seems to reassure her. Yet her observation is interrupted by an unexpected event that she "spotted", which could be considered "alarming." The conjunction "until" indeed demonstrates that Stella's tranquility is limited in time and is disturbed. Despite her desire to keep her distance from Loretta, Stella progressively leaves the audience and joins the performance.

Stella indeed goes beyond the blinds she was hiding behind, and joins the stage that she was observing from her window.

Stella initiates a sort of spy game: Stella collects information about Loretta as she knows her habits. Stella keeps control over her passing through her gaze: she invades Loretta's space with her gaze. However, Stella loses her privilege when she has to physically invade Loretta's space, and that Loretta also physically invades her space which leads to their encounter. That reversal deprives Stella of her advantage, now when Stella looks at her window, she no longer desires to see Loretta, but quite the contrary, as she expects not to see her: "Forget about spying out of her own curiosity – now she glanced through the blinds before fetching the mail, just to ensure that she wouldn't run into Loretta" (Bennett, 2020, 174). The dash reflects the shift in Stella's situation and purpose. Stella used to spy on Loretta to collect information about her and to evaluate the threat that Loretta represents for Stella's secret, as her Black neighbor. Yet when the two characters meet, Stella feels threatened by that proximity, and by the possibility that Loretta may unmask her. The tension peaks as Stella is no longer a spectator who hides to attend a spectacle, but now she hides to avoid the main performer of that spectacle. The verb "ensure" implies that Stella is in danger and that she has to be cautious and on her guard.

Loretta seems to be a version of Desiree in Stella's passing life. Her relationship with Loretta is a reenactment of her relationship with Desiree. This aspect is shown in the following quote: "She [Loretta] smiled, taking another drag of her cigarette, and that sly smile reminded Stella of Desiree. She felt like a girl again, sneaking a smoke on the porch while their mother slept" (Bennett, 2020, 181). Loretta and Desiree have common features which establish a connection between the two characters in Stella's eyes. Not only does Loretta's smile associate her with Desiree, but it also ties Stella to a specific moment in her past, reminding her of a specific memory with her twin sister. The parallel between Stella's recollection of Desiree, and her time spent with Loretta, suggests that Stella and Loretta's relationship functions as a reenactment of Stella and Desiree's relationship. That idea is reinforced when Stella is devastated by her separation from Loretta: "She was grieving for reasons that she could never explain. Like she'd lost Desiree all over again" (Bennett, 2020, 235). Stella's confusion over her grief for Loretta stems from her unconscious association of Loretta with Desiree – she may be reliving the pain of having left her sister behind. Yet it remains a hypothesis, as the readers do not have access to Stella's emotions

following her separation from Desiree in the narrative. However, Stella's reaction to losing Loretta may reveal how she felt upon abandoning her twin. The use of the comparative tool "like" establishes a parallel between Stella's grief after Loretta's departure and after losing Desiree; that parallel suggests that her response to the loss of Loretta may mirror her unspoken reaction to leaving Desiree. In this respect, Stella's separation from Loretta serves as an emotional echo of her past, reinforcing the idea that Loretta functions as a reflection of Desiree in Stella's life.

Stella also separates from Loretta because of race; the motif of their separation echoes the motif of Stella and Desiree's separation. Loretta represents a threat for Stella's secret, because as a Black person, she may recognize that Stella is Black; and Stella's affection for Loretta compromises her white character. That threat is highlighted by the fact that their respective houses face each other: "her house was right across the street – she could practically see into the woman's living room" (Bennett, 2020, 168). The fact that Loretta's house is facing Stella's can reinforce the idea that Loretta is a version of Desiree, as it gives the impression that they are mirroring each other. Loretta could function as Stella's reflection in a mirror. That quote underscores the proximity of the two houses and the lack of intimacy that that closeness creates. The adverbial phrase "right across the street" implies that the houses face each other and suggests that the two women are meant to be bond together. Moreover, the fact that Stella can almost see into Loretta's house suggests that Stella can intrude on Loretta's privacy since the house is the symbol of intimacy, of the private sphere. Even though Stella cannot reveal her true self within the confines of her house, her house in the novel functions as a metaphor for her secret. If Stella can "practically see into the woman's living room," it is possible that Loretta can also see into Stella's house – and then see Stella's true race. When Stella observes Loretta while hiding in her house, Stella protects herself from exposure: if Loretta glimpses Stella in her house, Loretta could see Stella's suppressed Black self and also discover her secret.

As suggested by Loretta's surname – Walker – the latter is not meant to remain in Stella's life. Her surname indeed suggests movement and the temporary nature of her presence; it underscores Loretta's transient presence in Stella's performance. The root of Loretta's surname is the verb 'walk,' it can have different grammatical associations which shift the meaning of that verb. Loretta indeed walked *into* Stella's life when she moved in the neighborhood. Loretta is the one who creates an interaction with Stella when she "smiled and waved" (168) but Loretta is also the

one who crosses the street which separates their respective houses and walks *to* Stella: "She found Loretta Walker on her welcome mat, holding Kennedy's doll. […] Then she thrust the doll into Stella's hands and walked back across the street" (Bennett, 2020, 174). Even though Loretta is already standing on Stella's welcome mat when the latter opens the door, her presence suggests that she walked to Stella's house. Her movement is repeated when she leaves as shown by the verb "walk" associated with the adverb "back," which implies that she is reenacting her initial movement, but in reverse.

Loretta also walked *out* of Stella's life: "By March, the Walkers left the Estates as suddenly as they'd arrived" (Bennett, 2020, 212). The Walkers' departure is unexpected and rapid. Their departure echoes their arrival as demonstrated by the comparison "as suddenly as they'd arrived" which draws a parallel between the two events. The parallel is reinforced by the reenactment of the Walkers' arrival observed by Stella: "But she still watched, through the blinds, as the yellow moving van pulled up, and a pack of young colored men slowly carried cardboard boxes out of the house" (Bennett, 2020, 212). Stella is still hiding behind the blinds to observe the Walkers, the adverb "still" reveals the continuity of her surveillance and suggests that despite the time that passed from the Walkers' arrival to their departure, Stella keeps watching them. The action that Stella looks at is the same as the one that she observed when the Walkers moved in, but in reverse. The reenactment of the Walkers' arrival suggests a cycle. Loretta's departure is definitive, the cycle is complete – Stella and Loretta's duo comes to an end.

In terms of performance, the scene that Stella watches could correspond to the end of Loretta's spectacle, as the setting is being uninstalled, which corresponds to the characters' departure. The precipitation of their departure implies urgency. Loretta walked out of Stella's life because their friendship transgressed the race line – Loretta and Stella could not be friends in this society. Loretta could not participate in Stella's performance. Her performance indeed takes place in a white environment, where Loretta is rejected because of her race. In this regard, the two characters cannot form a duo in this society. Moreover, even though Loretta and Stella's duo functions as a reenactment of Desiree and Stella's duo, this time, Stella is not the one who abandons the other half of the duo – Loretta is the one who rejects Stella. While Stella abandoned Desiree because the latter prevented Stella from suppressing her Black identity, Loretta rejects Stella because the latter compromises Loretta's Black identity. Loretta's and Stella's respective daughters

indeed are their extensions through their education. Considering this, when Kennedy insults Cindy – Loretta's daughter – because of her race, Stella is indirectly the one who condemns Loretta's Black identity:

> "You know what she said to Cindy? Well, the girls were playing some game and Kennedy was losing so she said, 'I don't want to play with a nigger.'"
>
> […]
>
> "No, I understand," Loretta said. "I don't blame her. It all comes from the home, see. And like a fool, I let you into mine" (Bennett, 2020, 210).

Loretta does not blame Kennedy for her racism but rather Stella, for she is the one who raised Kennedy to be a racist white girl. While Stella imitates racist white people, Kennedy imitates her mother who told her: "Because we don't play with niggers" (Bennett, 2020, 173). The general "we" implies that Stella is teaching a general rule to her daughter and that the pronoun designates white people. In this regard, she includes herself and her daughter to that "we." Moreover, the fact that Stella's sentence begins with the subordinating conjunction "because," suggests that that simple statement justifies racism. The parallel between Stella's statement and Kennedy's remark proves Loretta's assertion. It also emphasizes the idea that Kennedy is the extension of Stella; that same idea is also suggested by Loretta twice. The structure of her question "You know what she said to Cindy?" indeed implies that Stella may know the answer, for Loretta's question is actually an affirmation. Her question functions as a rhetorical question, Loretta does not expect an answer, as she answers her own question. Moreover, here, the house still functions as the symbol of intimacy, because when Loretta claims that she let Stella into her house, she suggests that she let Stella enter her private life, and she regrets it. Nevertheless, it also functions as the symbol of education, for Loretta alludes to the education that Kennedy received when she claims that "it all comes from the home." Thus, for Loretta, Kennedy is the embodiment of Stella's ideology – Stella is actually racist in Loretta's eyes.

Despite Stella's sadness about the end of their duo, Loretta's departure is convenient for Stella's passing performance as it reduces her chances to be exposed and allows her to keep control over her performance because her feelings no longer disrupt her passing.

d) Reenacting the Loss of the Other Half in Morrison's "Recitatif"

Twyla and Roberta's discrepancies are highlighted in Morrison's "Recitatif," every time they encounter. Those discrepancies are the result of the two protagonists' different cultures, races, political opinions and social classes. Those paragraphs about Morrison's "Recitatif" will not explore the short story's debate over the protagonists' races, but will rather focus on the contribution of life in society in their physical and metaphorical separation. Their differences take them away from their St. Bonaventure's selves. Those paragraphs will refer to the different encounters between the protagonists that I examined in the first chapter of this thesis. Twyla and Roberta are constantly in opposition; at each of their encounter, Twyla and Roberta are progressively in rupture with the St-Bonny's little girl that they respectively used to be. In this respect, they are also in rupture with the duo that they used to form in St. Bonaventure, linked by their complementarity.

Since St-Bonny is a locus which exists in the margins of society, it can be considered a heterotopia: "heterotopias of deviation: that is to say, the places that operate at the margins of society, in the desolate shores that surround it, are instead reserved for individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the average or the required norm" (Vidler, 20). Twyla and Roberta are considered "deviant," because their respective mothers are deviant individuals of society as non-traditional parents. The protagonists inherited their mothers' deviance and are born as such. Even though they are deviant in society, the girls are also deviant in the confines of the orphanage as children who were not "real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky" (5). Their difference unifies them in St-Bonny's. Yet when the two protagonists leave the heterotopia of St. Bonaventure, and enter society, they are no longer considered deviant as they integrate into society and conform to societal conventions. They are also no longer complementary – they become opposites. Despite the establishment of a hierarchy in the heterotopia, St. Bonaventure is a place where the white and the Black races can mix, and complement each other, whereas they do not in society – especially during segregation. The protagonists' separation suggests that class and race

are societal constructions which are believed to influence one's culture and political opinions, since Twyla and Roberta used to have the same status in St. Bonaventure.

The coming of their respective mothers demonstrates that the two mothers, who live in society, despise each other, due to their different races and social statuses which influence their lifestyles and their demeanor – society conditions them to be opposites. Nevertheless, their respective daughters' relationship is different since they do not belong to society; despite the fact that they are both influenced by their mothers in terms of habits: "The food was good, though. At least I thought so. Roberta hated it and left whole pieces of things on her plate: Spam, Salisbury steak – even Jell-O with fruit cocktail in it – and she didn't care if I ate what she wouldn't" (Morrison, 1983, 6). Twyla's opinion on the food diverges from Roberta's as demonstrated by the adjective "good" and the verb "hated" which reflect the girls' opposed attitudes toward that food. Twyla's acceptance of the food suggests that she may be familiar with such food or may lack food, due to her mother's poverty. On the contrary, Roberta's hatred of that food may suggest that she is not familiar with that type of food. That quote also demonstrates that the protagonists' differences are complementary, for Twyla eats what Roberta does not. Although that type of food does not necessarily belong to one race or the other, it may reflect one's social class, which is closely intertwined with race in the eyes of society. Their food customs are probably influenced by their respective mothers and by the culture and the social background their mothers identify with. Therefore, their opposite reactions suggest that in society, Roberta does not have access to the food that Twyla enjoys – and vice-versa. Yet in that heterotopia, the girls' habits and customs intertwine whereas they would not in society.

The girls are also influenced by their mothers in terms of stereotypes: "My mother won't like you putting me in here" (Morrison, 1983, 4). Twyla does not oppose to the sharing of their room because she rejects race mixing, but because her mother rejects that idea as shown by the mention of her mother. Twyla's comment does not express her own opinion but her mother's as she does not use the personal pronoun *I*. Those two instances reveal that the two protagonists are influenced by societal practices and norms, particularly regarding their mothers' social status and cultural background, which they carry into the heterotopia. Yet they do not fully belong there, as the locus disrupts the usual societal order – the girls ultimately conform to St. Bonaventure's rules. In "Navigating Races," I developed the oppositions between Twyla and Roberta in society due to

culture, class, political opinions, and memories of the past. Those factors are all societal constructs which divide the protagonists and progressively take them away from their marginalized duo of St. Bonaventure. In this subpart I will add that the girls are also separated by fashion which implicitly reflects their social class. When the girls first encounter in the diner, they are influenced by society in terms of fashion, and more specifically Roberta, which implicitly allows them to perform their social class: "Her own hair was so big and wild I could hardly see her face. […] She had on a powder-blue halter and shorts outfit and earrings the size of bracelets" (Morrison, 1983, 16). Roberta is influenced by the trends of her time – the late 60s. Those trends align with the societal norms which are associated with the middle-class counterculture women. Her outfit contrasts with Twyla's "apron" (16), which contributes to Twyla's performance of her lower-class status.

Their ultimate encounter reveals that their opposition was, in fact, internalized. Their differing interpretations of Maggie's race suggest that their respective social backgrounds shaped their perceptions, despite St-Bonny's norms. At each encounter, the protagonists reenact their mutual loss through physical separation, and the ideological divide between them which continues to widen. In St. Bonaventure, they were raised together, but after leaving the orphanage, they grew apart and began performing their intersectional identities, shaped by their differing races, classes, political opinions, and cultures.

e) Envy and Loss of the Self in Larsen's *Passing*

In Larsen's *Passing*, Irene's and Clare's lives are tied by their common past and by their shared secret: Irene knows that Clare is permanently passing as white, and Clare knows that Irene occasionally passes as white. Yet they are positioned as rivals and barely as friends. Unlike Stella, Clare is not the one who rejects the character who could disrupt her passing; Clare does the opposite as she attempts to bond with Irene. In this respect, Clare appears as a character who has agency over her racial identity and her life. Nevertheless, during Irene and Clare's interaction on the

Drayton's roof, the latter reveals that she started to pass because she wanted the same things as Irene:

> Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass.' You can't know, 'Rene, how, when I used to go over to the south side, I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others. Do you, can you understand what I felt? (Larsen, 1929, 27).

That quote underscores Clare's envy of Irene's life. Clare and Irene are in opposition here because they do not have the same experiences and not the same point of view. That opposition is revealed by the pronouns "you" and "I" in "you had all the things I wanted and never had had." There is a contrast between "you," which designates Irene, who possesses, and "I," which designates Clare, who does not possess and envies the one who does. However, the use of the past tense suggests that Clare no longer envies those things that Irene had, because she also had them, thanks to Irene who represented a source of inspiration in Clare's quest. Despite Irene's role in Clare's quest, Irene is positioned as a rival. Even though Clare asks her question in two different manners, it does not seem to be a reformulation but rather a gradation in her question. The primary auxiliary verb "do" allows Clare to simply ask Irene if she understands her feelings, whereas the use of the modal "can" suggests that for Clare, Irene has the capacity to understand Clare because she may herself feel the same thing. Clare asks her that question while both of them are passing at the same time.

Clare started to pass because she desired what Irene possesses – stability. Despite her passing which was supposed to bring stability into her life, when Clare encounters Irene on the Drayton's roof; that interaction awakens Clare's desire to reconnect with her Black identity. Yet the latter started to pass as white to cease navigating races, and to create herself a stable life as a white woman – no longer as a "mulatto." Nevertheless, Clare sees the stability that she was actually coveting in Irene's life: "Clare drank it all in, these things which for so long she had wanted to know and hadn't been able to learn. She sat motionless, her bright lips slightly parted, her whole face lit by the radiance of her happy eyes" (Larsen, 1929, 21). When Irene tells Clare what happened during the twelve years of her passing, Clare's thoughts implicitly reveal that the latter never ceased thinking about her Black life; here Irene acts as the bridge between Clare's past as a

Black girl and white Clare, because she tells them about people that the Black girl used to know. Irene also acts as a bridge between the Black world and white Clare, since she reintroduces elements from the Black world into Clare's life. Clare's reaction reminds one of a little girl listening to a tale. In her article entitled "Why Fairy Tales Matter: The Performative and the Transformative," Maria Tatar discusses the power of fairy tales, which enable children to shape their imagination, their desires, and their identity:

> The child reading a book, by learning about the magic art of the Great Humbug, can begin to move from the childhood condition of lacking the words needed to name, describe, and define what affects us. Fairy tales help children move from that disempowered state to a condition that may not be emancipation but that marks the beginnings of some form of agency (Tatar, 63).

Like a child listening to a fairy tale, Clare is now aware of her desires and understands what she needs to fulfill her desires – she has to be Black. Clare's interaction with Irene marks the beginning of her journey toward her reconnection with her Black self, but not her emancipation since Clare keeps passing as white while reconnecting with her Black self. Clare's good receptivity of fairy tales, and her capacity for imagination are confirmed when she states, four pages after, that she is able to "provide some plausible tale […] I've a good imagination" (25). It also implies her familiarity with fairy tales, which shaped her capacity to pass as white. In this regard, Irene's tale would reenact the process by which Clare started to pass but while triggering her desire to be Black – the perspective of a Black life. Irene is implicitly and unconsciously positioned as the story teller of that tale, who would act as Clare's guide in that new journey. Irene, as the story teller who is established in the Black world, and who possesses the knowledge that Clare longed for and wanted to possess, unintentionally inspires Clare to occupy her position.

Despite Clare's choice to pass as white in order to "get things," the latter still misses her Black identity. Her reconnection with Irene makes her threaten her own passing as I explained in "Passing as a Performance," as that encounter with Irene actually makes her regret her Black life: "'I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of….' […] 'and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago….' (Larsen, 1929, 6). Clare

started to pass in order to obtain what Irene possessed and that she did not, yet Clare also started to desire the reconnection with her Black self when she encountered Irene on the Drayton's roof. Clare actually covets what Irene possesses but she wants to do better than Irene. Clare also wants to navigate races, like Irene who is passing during that encounter. Nevertheless, she wants to take more risks than Irene as she wants to reconnect with her Black self while passing as white, and being married to a racist white man: "Although Clare looks white and is married to someone white, she oddly maintains a stronger sense of 'double-consciousness' than does Irene. She remains perpetually aware of her own racial origin and her duplicitous positionality" (Brody, 1055). That analysis illustrates the paradox between Clare and Irene. Despite her life as a white woman, Clare is aware of her passing and of her Black ancestry that she tries to reconnect with. Yet unlike Clare, Irene does not pass permanently, but she tends to act more white than Black, and to side with white characters, even racist ones.

Clare deprives Irene of her identity as she calls her 'Rene. The letter 'I' in Irene's first name symbolizes the Western traditions that Irene embodies since "Irene has tried to destroy parts of her heritage by insisting that a 'rising tower' (the letter 'I' itself) remain in her name-in short, by calling herself Irene' (Brody, 1059). By calling Irene *'Rene,* Clare deprives Irene of her coveted whiteness and of her authority since Irene claims: "And though nobody calls me 'Rene anymore" (Larsen, 1929, 16). Despite Irene's answer, Clare still calls her 'Rene, which suggests that Clare is the only one who perceives Irene as the Black girl she used to be in Chicago, and not as the Black woman with internalized Western values who lives in Harlem. Additionally, the name Rene means 'reborn.' Clare's choice to call Irene by this name suggests that Irene's life serves as the means through which Clare can be 'reborn' as a Black woman. Moreover, the name *Irene* means "peace" in Greek; the meaning of her name echoes Irene's desire for stability in her life, but that Clare disrupts when she erases the letter 'I' in her name. Like Clare who bears her husband's surname – Kendry, which contributes to her white identity, Irene also bears her husband's surname – Redfield, which contributes to her Black identity. Her maiden name, *Westover*, indeed reflects Irene's internalized white values since it suggests a place to the West – Europe. In this respect, Irene's maiden name may echo Irene's colonial tendencies.

The novella seems to refer to Clare's permanent passing, yet it actually alludes more to Irene's passing, who is the one who passes from the beginning to the end of that work – her passing takes different forms:

> Thus, Irene Redfield, the true protagonist, who could (but rarely does) 'pass for white' has more truly lost her heritage than Clare who literally removes herself from Black life and lives as a white among whites. The title *Passing* is thus ironic, for it is Irene who 'passes.' The theme of the novel develops this irony (Youman, 235).

Clare passes as white, but progressively reconnects with her Black self until the end of her passing performance, when she dies as a Black woman. However, Irene physically passes as white occasionally, but she constantly passes as white through the internalization of white values which lead her to side with white characters and to form alliances with them. Paradoxically, Irene is not threatened by Clare's coveting her Black life, but by Clare disrupting her stable life where she can be a white woman in a Black body, living a Black life. Clare's reconnection with her Blackness may discredit Irene's Blackness.

Irene indeed "'passes' not by adopting a white identity as Clare does, but by adopting white values, including white standards of beauty" (Sullivan, 374). Irene adopts colonial tendencies, which implicitly lead her to side with whites' values and ideologies – Blacks are inferior to whites. Irene passes as a white bourgeois woman while reproducing whites' race-based hierarchies; as I developed previously, Irene hires Black servants. By doing so, Irene positions herself as superior to her Black servants, and occupies white people's dominant position in society. Irene also shares commonalities with white people; she and Bellew both appreciate the Drayton: "'How do you like the Drayton, Mrs. Redfield?' the latter asked. 'The Drayton? Oh, very much. Very much indeed,' […] 'Nice place, all right'" (Larsen, 1929, 47). Both Bellew and Irene enjoy the Drayton, a locus which symbolizes white superiority and whites' privileges. Since John Bellew perceives Irene as white, he wants to know if she shares his sense of white superiority that whiteness can grant her. Bellew's question may function as a test to evaluate Irene's sense of white superiority. Irene passes that test as she enjoys that place, which suggests that she enjoys her white superiority.

Moreover, Irene's sense of white superiority makes her an individualist in her Black family since she deprives her children of the knowledge about racial discrimination they suffer. She makes

racially-motivated violence a taboo when Ted asks about lynchings: "'Because they hate 'em, son.' 'Brian! Irene's voice was a plea and a rebuke. Ted said: 'Oh! And why do they hate 'em?' […] 'Because –' 'Brian!'" (Larsen, 1929, 126). By interrupting that conversation, Irene asserts her authority within her Black family by controlling the topics discussed, and the extent of her sons' knowledge about race. Irene's tone implies that she does not want her son to know about the cruelty of racism. Even though she seems to be willing to preserve and protect her son from the shame to be Black in a white-dominant society, or to preserve his innocence, Irene actually attempts to preserve her own stability as a Black woman with white values. She cannot be the mother of a victim of the system that she adheres to, and which paradoxically marginalizes her. The dash indicates that Irene interrupts Brian, reflecting Irene's urgency which is reinforced by the exclamation marks. The punctuation reveals Irene's annoyance with her husband's disobedience.

Additionally, Clare's interbreeding provides her whiteness, that Irene admires as she constantly refers to it, as the adjectives "pale" (4, 45, 81) and "ivory" (12, 81, 111) are often used to describe Clare from Irene's perspective. Clare's whiteness makes Irene think of her as "incredibly beautiful" (49) and "extraordinarily beautiful" (94). Irene also links Clare's whiteness with her beauty: "Clare's ivory face was what it always was, beautiful and caressing" (Larsen, 1929, 111). Clare's "ivory face" contrasts with Irene's "warm olive skin" (60) that the latter does not associate with beauty standards. The adjective which qualifies the color of her skin, "warm," highlights the subtle darkness of Irene's skin color but does not embellish it, unlike Clare's ivory skin which is repeatedly complimented. The romanticization of Clare's skin color aligns with society's beauty standards which position whiteness as superior.

The idea that Clare envies Irene's life and wants to reconnect with her Black self is further reinforced when Clare considers moving in Harlem: "I'd do what I want to do more than anything else right now. I'd come up here to live. Harlem, I mean. Then I'd be able to do as I please, when I please" (Larsen, 1929, 130). Clare ponders her options if John Bellew were to know about her passing. Clare implies that being Black would grant her freedom, as suggested by her repeated expression of desire through the conditional structures "I'd do what I want" and "I'd be able to do as I please." Those expressions insist on Clare's perspective of freedom, and emphasize Clare's desire for independence. Moreover, those two conditional structures frame the sentences "I'd come up here to live. Harlem, I mean," which express Clare's desire to move in Harlem – a symbol of

Blackness. It strengthens the idea that for Clare, Blackness is a way to autonomy and agency. Nevertheless, Clare's wished freedom remains a hypothetical situation, as shown by the use of conditional structures which express the possible realization of her wishes, but not the certitude that it would happen. Additionally, Clare is aware of her intrusion into Irene's life, as she corrects herself when she replaces the adverb "here" by the proper noun "Harlem," and adds the discourse marker "I mean," which demonstrates that Clare clarifies her original idea. That reformulation demonstrates that Clare wants to avoid creating confusion within Irene, who is also aware of Clare's intrusion into her life. In this regard, Clare's desire to live in Harlem, on her own, after the potential end of her passing, suggests that her intrusion into Irene's life may be a way for Clare to reconnect with her Black self to reach independence and freedom through her Black life.

f) Deprivation of Blackness in Larsen's *Passing*

In Larsen's *Passing*, Irene is deprived of her Blackness by the narrator and by other characters. Irene is associated with white people in the narrative when she claims that she is able to recognize Black people or people passing as Black. Nevertheless, Irene fails to immediately recognize Clare as a Black woman despite Clare's use of Irene's nickname that only Black people could know: "What white girls had she known well enough to have been familiarly addressed as 'Rene by them?" (Larsen, 1929, 15). Irene's interrogation reveals that she fails to recognize Clare, and more specifically, to recognize her as a Black woman. Interestingly enough, she also immediately identifies her as white. Her mistake demonstrates that she fails to read race and suggests that she may fail to read her own race as argued by Michael A. Istvan Jr. in his article "The Manner of Blackness in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," in which he states that Blackness is undefined and unfixed by biology, but is rather a social and experience-based construction. In this regard, despite her ancestry, Irene is not necessarily Black: "If Irene can be so deluded about herself, it seems reasonable to mistrust her larger claims about race" (Istvan, 123). Irene may have

identified as Black because she felt forced to as someone born of Black parents, as a Harlem inhabitant, with a Black family. Nonetheless, Irene's demeanor and mindset align with white characters rather than with Black ones. Irene identifies as Black but acts more like a white character.

When Irene fails to read Clare's race, Irene implicitly acts like white people who also claim to be able to recognize Black people: "White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell, and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot" (Larsen, 1929, 14). The narrator ridicules those white people who think that such details reveal one's race, those characteristics are human characteristics but not racial features. Even though Irene does not read race through physical characteristics, and that she does not fail to recognize Black people, she still needs time to perceive their true race: "Well, take my own experience with Dorothy Thompkins. I'd met her four or five times, in groups and crowds of people, before I knew she wasn't a Negro. […] Not from anything she did or said or anything in her appearance" (Larsen, 1929, 91). While Black people are thought to instantly recognize Black people in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, this is not the case in Larsen's *Passing*.

In this respect, Irene may fail to perceive her internalized whiteness and seems to be convinced of her Blackness due to her active engagement in the Black community: "The Negro Welfare League, you know, I'm on the ticket committee, or, rather I *am* the committee" (Larsen, 1929, 80). The emphasis on the verb 'be' in the first person "am," reinforces the idea that Irene identifies herself as the embodiment of the Black race. She indeed makes the difference between belonging to the Black community, represented by the Negro Welfare League as an organization which historically aimed at supporting African Americans, and embodying the community. Irene's reformulation implies that she perceives herself as a fully and committed Black individual.

Moreover, Brian and Clare's supposed affair reflects Clare's intrusion into Irene's life and appropriation of her Black life. Brian acts as the embodiment of the Black identity that Clare wants to reconnect with: "She [Irene] remembered catching glimpses of Clare in the whirling crowd, dancing, sometimes with a white man, more often with a Negro, frequently with Brian" (Larsen, 1929, 88). In that quote, Clare's change of partners reflects her racial navigation, as well as the

evolution of her racial identification from a white woman to a Black woman. The gradation "sometimes with a white man, more often with a Negro, frequently with Brian" reveals that Clare is more connected to the Black race and more specifically to Brian, who embodies the Black life that Irene progressively abandons in the novella and that Clare envies.

Yet despite Irene's reluctance to Clare's reconnection with her Black self through her intrusion into her life, Irene implicitly, and probably unconsciously, lets Clare take her place: "Clare went, sometimes with Irene and Brian, to parties and dances, and on a few occasions when Irene hadn't been able or inclined to go out, she had gone alone with Brian to some bridge party or benefit dance" (Larsen, 1929, 94). Clare intrudes into Brian and Irene's couple while joining them to go out, yet Clare takes Irene's place when the latter is absent because she cannot or decides not to go out. Considering this, Clare acts like Irene's substitute when Irene cannot occupy her position as Brian's partner, or when she implicitly agrees to step aside for Clare through her decision not to attend those events.

Brian implicitly deprives Irene of her Blackness when he has an affair with Clare, for when Irene asked him if he thought that Clare is beautiful, he answered: "I like my ladies darker" (Larsen, 1929, 94). His remark functions as a euphemism to designate Black women, yet by choosing Clare over Irene, Brian implicitly ceases to identify Irene as Black. He is indeed attracted by Black women, like Clare, but no longer by Irene who progressively abandons her Black self. Despite the fact that Brian and Irene remain married, Brian implicitly breaks up with Irene: "Behind her she heard the gentle impact of the door as it closed behind him, and knew that he had gone. Down to Clare" (Larsen, 1929, 107). The door here separates Brian and Irene, and represents Brian's choice. When he closes the door and goes downstairs, Brian symbolically leaves Irene, who no longer is a "dark" lady like he likes, to join Clare, who progressively reconnects with her Black identity – that reconnection makes Clare darker than Irene in Brian's eyes. The closed door symbolizes Brian's rupture with Irene and the possibility of a new relationship with a "darker" lady. The ultimate sentence of that quote – "Down to Clare" – emphasizes Brian's direction and choice as it indicates both Brian's physical and symbolic movement.

Clare's staircase climbs in the novella symbolize her appropriation of the things she covets – like her climb to the room of Irene's sons or her ultimate climb, the one during which she finally

adopts her Black identity. In her article "Staircase and Ladder: Shape and Meaning in Art from Ancient Egypt to Christianity," Sara El-Sayed Kitat explains the symbolism of stairs and ladders in Ancient Egypt and Christianity. She explains that they represent ascension: "The staircase is strongly associated with the concept of ascension in Christianity" (El-Sayed Kitat, 87) and "Resurrection and ascension are the two major events in the lives of both Osiris and Christ which were expressed through the shape of the ladder and staircase" (El-Sayed Kitat, 102). In the novella, Clare's act of climbing staircases symbolizes her metaphorical and symbolic ascents, marking her evolution in her journey toward her Black self. Yet she paradoxically perceives those ascents as positive, whereas being Black in her society would deprive her of all the privileges that she enjoys as a white woman in terms of power and social class. For Clare, Blackness symbolizes a more personal and emotional ascent – one rooted in individual identity rather than societal elevation. Meanwhile Brian's stairs descent here symbolizes the author's approval of Clare's desire to embrace Blackness, as Blackness is embodied by Brian, who chooses her.

Irene's sons also implicitly deprive their mother of her Blackness. In the novella, there is no interaction between Clare and her daughter, Margery born from her union with her racist white husband during her passing. Nevertheless, Clare interacts with Irene's sons, which creates a contrast between Margery's distance with Clare, since she is in Switzerland, and Clare's proximity with Irene's sons, as she desires to meet them: "'Should you like to come up and see my boys?' 'I'd love to'" (Larsen, 1929, 83). The act of climbing the staircase symbolizes Clare's progress in her journey toward a Black identity, since that climb leads to her encounter with the boys, who implicitly accept Clare into the Black community: "'Please don't be cross. Of course, I know I've gone and spoiled everything. But maybe, if I promise not to get too much in the way, you'll let me come in, just the same.' 'Sure, come in if you want to,' Ted told her. 'We can't stop you, you know'" (Larsen, 1929, 84). Clare implicitly asks Irene's sons, who here embody the Black community, to accept her as a Black individual. Despite her continued passing, Clare seems to regret her passing and her rupture with her Black self. Clare also seems to be entitled to the right to be Black, since Ted expresses the community's powerlessness against Clare's determination. Irene has unconsciously yielded her place to Clare as she is the one who provokes their encounter.

Both Clare and Irene actually envy each other's life, and both of them reject their Black identity at some point in their respective journeys. Clare thought that being white would enable her

to obtain a stable identity – to cease the racial navigation while concealing her black ancestry to please her aunts – to belong to a community. Yet it led her to even less racial stability until she fully reconnected with her Black self. Unlike Irene, who progressively suppresses her Black identity, either unconsciously or hypocritically since she affirms to be Black while siding with white characters and internalizing white values.

In Bennett's and Larsen's works, the passing characters lose their other half, as well as their self because of their decision to suppress their Black identity. In Morrison's short story, Twyla and Roberta lose each other every time they encounter. Loss is a major risk and one of the many consequences of the practice of passing. Loss leads those characters to loneliness, which is also provoked by the necessity for secrecy to pass successfully.

2) Secrecy

In the three works under study, passing is intertwined with secrecy. In her work entitled *The Spectacle of the Secret*, Arielle Meyer elaborates on the process of secrecy, and does not limit its definition to an isolation:

> The process of secrecy would not rely on exclusion, as suggested by its Latin origin, but rather on confusion, which requires illusion. To keep a secret, one must act 'as if' one had no secret. Pretending determines the game of secrecy, a game in which the actor playing constitutes the artistic consecration, but which, while borrowing drama techniques, also manifests itself in life.[13]

The process of keeping a secret is more complex than simply choosing not to reveal its content. To successfully keep a secret, one has to rely on different factors and strategies which mostly consist in producing one or several lies, and substituting the truth. In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and in Larsen's *Passing*, both Stella and Clare have to live in secrecy in order to succeed in their passing. A secret is meant to be kept and not shared, otherwise, those who know about the content of the secret also become responsible for maintaining its confidentiality. Considering this, the secret's owners are deprived of their total control over the secret. In Morrison's "Recitatif," the secret about Twyla and Roberta's race is kept by Morrison and the narrator, and is never shared. The secret about Maggie's race is also never revealed, but is kept by Morrison only, as Twyla's ultimate encounter with Roberta made her doubt her interpretation of Maggie's race. Twyla, Roberta, and Maggie's race is the object of a secret they do not acknowledge. This specificity demonstrates that a secret does not necessarily involve its owner – and that the subjects of a secret are not necessarily aware of their involvement in a secret.

[13]My translation of : « L'opération du secret ne relèverait pas d'une mise à l'écart, comme nous invite à l'entendre son origine latine, mais au contraire d'une confusion qui nécessite le recours à l'illusion. Pour garder un secret, il faut 'faire comme si' on n'avait pas de secret. Ce faire 'faire comme si' détermine le jeu du secret, un jeu dont celui du comédien constitue la consécration artistique, mais qui, tout en empruntant au théâtre ses techniques, se déploie également dans la vie. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, pp.15–16.

a) Hiding and not Saying

In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half,* Stella Vignes thinks that the best strategy to protect her secret is to remain silent – the less she talks, the less she risks to reveal her secret: "She ate lunch at her desk and spoke as little as possible, certain that she'd say the wrong thing and make somebody wonder about her" (Bennett, 2020, 196). This quote reveals that Stella functions as the extension of her secret – if she isolates herself, she isolates her secret. This strategy is one of the components analyzed by Michael L. Slepian in his article entitled "A Process Model of Having and Keeping Secrets," in which he focuses on the different experiences and components of secrecy, and adopts a new approach on the question of secrecy. Slepian describes monitoring:

> Those with concealable stigmas engage in effortful activity to ensure that leakages of stigma-related information do not occur. This includes careful monitoring of one's own behavior […] The more one is reminded of their concealable stigma and thus monitors, the more concealment behaviors are engaged, predicting distress (Slepian, 10).

Stella withdraws from social interactions to avoid accidentally revealing her secret. If Stella does not interact with others, she does not need to worry about the others' perception of her attitude and of her words. Her potential interactions with other characters would indeed indirectly dictate her demeanor, as she would obsessively think about concealing her secret, yet her over efforts would influence her behavior which would paradoxically suggest the concealment of a secret. In this respect, remaining on her own allows Stella not to act awkwardly around others, and then not lead them to suspect the existence of her secret.

Not only does Stella avoid social interactions, but she also avoids society. The first mention of Stella after her departure from New Orleans – after the beginning of her new life – highlights her absence: "He's [Blake] too busy trying to distract himself from the fact that Mother isn't here. […] I came all the way in from school because he got some big promotion, and she couldn't even bother to show up. Now isn't that a bitch?" (Bennett, 2020, 147). Like at the beginning of her permanent passing, at Maison Blanche, Stella monitors her behavior while isolating herself, yet she no longer hides, as she is now absent. Stella's withdrawal from society is difficult to understand

for her family as revealed by Kennedy's anger and the rude words she has for her mother. That quote shows that for Stella, the protection of her secret is a priority, for she misses an event which is important in her husband's life. The concealment of her secret makes Stella appear selfish, and reflects a negative image of her, provoking her daughter's frustration, and reinforcing her hatred of her mother. Although Kennedy overtly expresses her frustration, Blake expresses his frustration differently, his attitude reveals that Stella's absence impacts him. Stella purposefully withdraws from social events to lower her chances of being unmasked. She paradoxically sacrifices her family life to protect it. Considering this, keeping such a secret is a lonely path. Despite her decision to pass as white to enjoy white privileges, including marrying Blake, Stella cannot solely enjoy them, otherwise she would risk to lose them.

Even before Stella started to pass as white permanently, secrecy already surrounded Stella's life. Her mother Adele Vignes knew about her future passing; as she knew about Stella's first passing experience in Opelousas that I analyzed in "Navigating Races." In the novel, the narrator implicitly designates Adele as a secret keeper, for the first sentence of the first paragraph telling Stella's experience with the shopgirl is: "Here was the story her mother had been keeping" (Bennett, 2020, 73). By starting the paragraph with this sentence, the narrator emphasizes the secrecy surrounding Stella's passing. Considering this, passing is intrinsically associated with secrecy – passing is a taboo. Secrecy does not only surround the passer, it also surrounds those who know about the passing.

Among the Mallard inhabitants, Stella's passing was a secret in the beginning, which was progressively shared and ultimately revealed. Willie Lee was indeed the first character to know about Stella's passing tendencies as he saw her passing in the shop, yet he retained this piece of information: "He [Willie Lee] had something to tell Adele – something he should've told her weeks before Founder's Day" (Bennett, 2020, 73). Unlike Adele and Stella, Willie Lee is unable to keep a secret. Willie Lee shares that secret with Adele, for it foreshadowed Stella's departure and her permanent passing – Willie Lee's secret actually provides the reason for Stella's departure. Moreover, Willie Lee regrets the dissimulation of that secret as shown by the modal "should" associated with the verb "have." This association expresses his mistake, and shows that the concealment of a secret is not necessarily a good decision. The expression of obligation "have to" implies that Willie Lee is confessing to Adele, and that he could no longer bear that responsibility.

While confessing, he decides to share his secret with Adele, who becomes responsible for it in turn and decides to keep it to herself.

Stella's first passing experience was initially Willie Lee's secret, and then Adele's, Stella was just the subject of this secret. Nevertheless, Stella did not talk about her experience either – she also kept it to herself. Stella has always been keeping secrets, whether they were hers or not: "She [Stella] was the only person Desiree ever shared her secrets with. […] Stella listened, sometimes judged, but never told, and that was the part that mattered most. Telling Stella a secret was like whispering into a jar and screwing the lid tight. Nothing escaped her" (Bennett, 2020, 15). Young Stella's capacity to keep secrets foreshadows Stella's secrecy surrounding her permanent passing. The narrator seems to highlight that capacity since they specify that "that was the part that mattered most," as if they wanted to bring the readers' attention on her loyalty. The comparison "telling Stella a secret was like whispering into a jar and screwing the lid tight" emphasizes Stella's taciturn nature; that idea is further reinforced by the sentence "Nothing escaped her." Stella has control over the concealment of those secrets, as demonstrated by the adverb "never" and the pronoun "nothing" which stress the irrevocability of Stella's loyalty. Stella also seems to be a trustworthy person as Desiree trusts solely Stella to share intimate confessions with her. Stella's role as the listener, and not as the speaker, suggests that keeping secrets is in her nature; the adverb "never" and the use of the preterit as in "listened" and "told" allude to a habit – her role as the secret keeper was permanent. Moreover, the mention of jars may be a reference to Marcia Vaughan's 2011 picture book entitled *Irena's Jars of Secrets*. The narrative is based on the true story of Irena Slender, a Polish Catholic who rescued Jewish children during the Holocaust. She kept secret lists of their names in jars, in order to reunite them with their families after the end of the war. Bennett may have been aware of that book and may have used the jar as a symbol of secrecy in her novel.

Moreover, Stella has always been able to bear the burden of secrecy, as she has always kept her twin sister's secrets, but also her own: "But she hadn't imagined then that Stella was keeping secrets of her own" (Bennett, 2020, 15). Despite Desiree's inclination to tell Stella all her secrets, the latter does not share her twin sister's habits. Desiree's lack of suspicion of Stella's secrets proves that the latter does not appear secretive in Desiree's eyes, and may suggest that Desiree would indirectly expect Stella to share her secrets with her, as she does. Stella's silence proves that

she is able to keep her secrets to herself, and she does not need to share them. That idea is reinforced by Stella's demeanor before the twins escape from Mallard: "Desiree feeling like she might burst open from carrying their secret. But Stella seemed just as calm as usual" (Bennett, 2020, 15). The twins react differently to the burden of secrecy, Desiree struggles to keep the secret and is affected by the pressure that it provokes, whereas Stella's attitude reveals that keeping a secret does not impact her. For Stella, keeping a secret seems natural and ordinary.

Furthermore, Stella involves Kennedy in her secrecy. Stella imposes her secret life on Kennedy, as she subtly forces her to hide the truth from her father about the playdates to the Walkers:

> When they returned home, she told her daughter not to mention the playdate to Blake.
> "Why?" Kennedy asked. Stella knelt in front of her, untying her shoes.
> "Because," she said, "Daddy likes us to be at home. But if you don't say anything, we can keep going across the street. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" (Bennett, 2020, 183).

Stella asks Kennedy to keep their secret, yet the latter does not understand the purpose of that secret, as shown by the interrogative adverb "why" followed by a question mark. Kennedy's question reveals that she does not perceive the risks of the playdates. Through that request, Stella involves Kennedy in her passing secret, without her being aware of it, or agreeing to it. That quote reveals that one can be forced to keep a secret. To achieve her goal, Stella manipulates her daughter, as she subtly euphemizes her request by asking her to lie while accomplishing ordinary tasks like untying her shoes. Stella also subtly leads her daughter to rebel against her father who likes them to be at home, as she knows that Kennedy prefers to play with Cindy Walker, rather than staying at home. In order to make her daughter keep their secret, Stella pretends that it is for Kennedy's own good, so that she can enjoy with her friend, as suggested by the tag question "You'd like that, wouldn't you?". Yet the conditional structure "but if you don't say anything, we can keep going across the street" suggests that their visits to the Walkers rely on Kennedy's silence – Stella subtly pressures Kennedy to keep their secret. Despite Stella's manipulation, her kneeling position paradoxically suggests that she is begging her daughter to keep their secret. Stella's request is actually an act of selfishness, and she indirectly teaches her daughter to be secretive like her.

Moreover, in Larsen's *Passing*, Clare goes to Harlem when her husband leaves town: "Her visits were undecided and uncertain, being, as they were, dependent on the presence or absence of John Bellew in the city" (Larsen, 1929, 95). Despite Clare's extrovert nature and exuberant demeanor, she ensures the protection of her secret by hiding her visits to Harlem from her husband. The frequency of her husband's absences indirectly influences the significance of the secret, as the more absent he is, the more Clare goes to Harlem, and the more her secret grows. Moreover, those secret visits to Harlem can only occur when John Bellew is away, so he unconsciously enables the secrecy. In this respect, Clare has the intention to have a secret. In his article, Michael L. Slepian defines secrecy as more than simply a concealment, but also as an intention. Slepian writes: "One cannot purposefully work to conceal a secret from someone if they do not first intend to do so. For this reason, the model identifies intention as the beginning of secrecy" (Slepian, 2). According to this statement, considering the fact that Clare Kendry waits for her husband to be away to go to Harlem, she already had the intention to keep it a secret before producing the secret.

Furthermore, Clare dissimulates her secret while remaining silent. In her work, Arielle Meyer writes that "sometimes, the preservation of a secret does not necessarily require lying at all: "The unsuspected murderer will refrain from claiming 'I am not a murderer,' they will simply act as if they were not."[14] When John Bellew claims: "I know you're no nigger, so it's all right." (Larsen, 1929, 43), Clare does not correct him, instead she remains silent, for John does not suspect Clare's Black identity. Through her silence, she implicitly confirms his statement, and aligns with John's perception of her – in his eyes she is white, so she has to act as such. Thus, Clare is not the one who tells the lie, but John is, without even being aware of it.

In Morrison's "Recitatif," the race of Twyla, Roberta, and Maggie remains hidden and not revealed by the author and the narrator throughout the short story. The writerly function of the text paradoxically contributes to the protection of the secret, as Morrison's purpose is to lead the readers to engage with the narrative – Morrison never reveals the secret, for she expects her readers to forge their own opinion. In his article entitled "Learning Is [Like] an Act of Writing: The Writerly Turn in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education," Robert Gray explores the possibility of

[14] My translation of : « Parfois même, le maintien d'un secret peut se passer de tout recours à des paroles mensongères : l'assassin que personne ne soupçonne se gardera bien de s'exclamer 'je ne suis pas un assassin', il se contentera de se comporter comme s'il ne l'était pas. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, p.35.

applying Roland Barthes's concept of the writerly text to teaching and learning processes. Morrison's work can be considered teaching, as she intends to deconstruct her readers' interpretation of race, while showing them that race is unfixed. Gray defines Barthes's concept: "Writerly texts require the reader to actively participate in the production of the text's meaning, making the act of reading into an act of writing" (Gray, 5). The secret kept by Morrison and the narrator serves as the motif for the readers' active participation. In this regard, the concealment of the protagonists' race is essential to the purpose of this short story. Unlike the other two works, secrecy in "Recitatif" is not an act of selfishness or meant to ensure privileges, it is rather used as a teaching tool and as a key narrative device.

b) Lying and Substituting the Truth

In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, for the protection of her secret Stella is both passive and active, as she simply does not reveal her secret; yet she also lies about her past and her attitude. Stella adopts two techniques to produce coherent and convincing lies, as she creates stories to replace the truth, and she sometimes reshapes reality or omits major details in her stories: "She'd tell Kennedy, as she'd told everyone, that she was from Opelousas, and beyond that, she would barely talk about her childhood at all" (Bennett, 2020, 158). Although Stella did not actually grow up in Opelousas, that city is part of her youth, as it is the city where she used to work with her twin sister. Stella reshapes her past while incorporating real elements of her life in invented stories.

As suggested by Arielle Meyer, Stella is following the rule of substitution: "The functioning of secrecy: for an utterance to be kept aside, another has to be produced instead. One of the rules which would govern the discourse of secrecy would be a rule of substitution: one word for

another."[15] Stella is constrained to answer her family's questions, and to mention her past, otherwise, she would be suspicious. To convince her husband and daughter that she was born white, Stella has to provide them with elements proving her whiteness, while concealing her real past. Instead of mentioning *Mallard*, Stella replaces that element with the name of the city *Opelousas* which "was the temporary Confederate capital of Louisiana during the American Civil War."[16] In this regard, although Stella probably chose Opelousas as her fake hometown because it was the closest town to Mallard, Stella may also have chosen this city for its racist history, which adds credibility to her racist character. She may also have chosen Opelousas because she experienced that city as both a Black girl and a white girl.

Stella indeed experienced racism from the owners of the house she cleaned with her sister: "On their first day, Mrs. Dupont studied the twins a minute, then said absently to her husband, 'What pretty girls. So light, aren't they?'" (Bennett, 2020, 13). The twin sisters are objectified by Mrs. Dupont, and ultimately complimented on their beauty because it aligns with white beauty standards – having a light complexion. The question tag "So light, aren't they?" implicitly justifies Mrs. Dupont's perception of the twins' beauty. The minute taken by Mrs. Dupont to examine them suggests that the twin sisters appear foreign to her – as though she is discovering a new species. That scene demonstrates that Stella acknowledges the racism in Opelousas. It is also the city where the shopgirl mistook Stella for white – Stella's first passing experience. That experience enabled Stella to become aware of white superiority and of the privileges it grants.

Moreover, Stella created convenient stories, as she stated that her family was dead. Considering this, her persona is not only white, but also an orphan. Her status as an orphan completes the process of isolation required in the mechanism of secrecy, as she isolates the truth and distances herself from her past. Her husband and daughter would never be able to meet her family. Stella also indirectly makes the conversation about her family a taboo in her household: "'Mommy doesn't

[15] My translation of : « Le fonctionnement du secret : pour qu'un énoncé soit tenu à l'écart, il faut en produire un autre à sa place. Une des règles qui présiderait au discours du secret serait une règle de substitution : un mot pour un autre. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, p. 27.

[16] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Opelousas | Cajun Culture, Creole Cuisine and Historic Sites." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 July 1998, www.britannica.com/place/Opelousas.

like talking about her family,' he [Blake] murmured. 'It makes her sad' 'But why?' 'Because. They aren't here anymore. So don't ask her anything else, okay?'" (Bennett, 2020, 159). While telling her family that her own family is dead, Stella uses the taboo of death to protect her secret and hide her past. In their article entitled "Taboo and the Different Death? Perceptions of those Bereaved by Suicide or other Traumatic Death," Alison Chapple, Sue Ziebland, and Keith Hawton explore people's different reactions to tragic deaths, and more specifically the reactions of the victims' relatives and friends. The authors introduce the concept of the death taboo and state that "other people, including family members, may be particularly reluctant to talk about such deaths, which may make it hard for survivors to find others with whom they can share their feelings […] Avoiding the topic of death is sometimes called the 'death taboo'" (Chapple, et al., 617). By pretending that her family is dead, Stella implicitly invites her husband and daughter not to mention them, because it is supposedly a painful event for her which she does not want to be reminded of. Thanks to the "death taboo," Stella avoids a subject which would threaten her secret as her mother and twin sister would be a living proof of her lies. Furthermore, when Stella tells that her family is dead, not only is it convenient for the protection of her secret, but Stella also symbolically severs ties with her past and her Black family.

Additionally, Stella lies to the characters who represent a threat for her secret. The only character with whom Stella shared about her past is Kennedy when she was a child. Stella knew that young Kennedy would not remember her revelations, so she told her the truth:

> "Where are you from, Mommy?"
>
> […]
>
> "A little town down south," Stella said. "You won't have heard of it."
> "But where?" Kennedy asked.
>
> […]
>
> "It's just a little place called Mallard, darling," she said. "It's nothing like Los Angeles."
> She'd been, for the first and final time, completely honest with her daughter, only because she knew the girl was too young to remember (Bennett, 2020, 158).

Stella answered her daughter's question honestly, yet she hesitated to tell the truth as shown by the reiteration of Kennedy's question. Her mother did not provide her a satisfactory answer, for she did not exactly answer her question the first time. Stella is evasive as her first answer is vague, and she even implicitly encourages Kennedy to forget about her answer when she assures Kennedy that the latter does not know her hometown. Nonetheless, Stella yielded to Kennedy's desire to know about her past, as she reveals her hometown's name. Moreover, the adverb "completely" implies that Stella did not hide anything from Kennedy during that conversation, yet Stella substitutes the truth for Kennedy after that interaction between the mother and daughter. Despite Stella's honesty, the latter minimizes the information she shared with her daughter, as the use of the adverb "just" makes Stella's declaration insignificant. The fact that Stella accepts to tell the truth to Kennedy because she "was too young to remember," suggests that Kennedy's young age is the sole reason for Stella's honesty, as implied by the conjunction phrase "only because." Moreover, Stella's disposition to tell the truth demonstrates that her nature is not to be a liar since she could have lied to her. Stella must deny her nature to protect her secret.

Furthermore, Stella also has to deny her Black nature to protect her secret. When Stella acts like a racist, she substitutes her true self with racism; she mimics the other white women. Arielle Meyer develops:

> This substitution process fits into the dialectic of separation and confusion elaborated by Marin: setting apart the masked identity requires merging into the opposite identity. Separation requires confusion through a principle of permutation. This is the game of secrecy – a game about identity and difference, a game which involves "immersing the singular individual in the mass of similar individuals from whom they differ in order to conceal them." To hide difference, one has to appear identical, identical to others whose identity is different.[17]

[17] My translation of : « Ce procédé de substitution s'inscrit bien dans la dialectique de la séparation et de la confusion élaborée par Marin : mettre à part l'identité masquée exige de se fondre dans l'identité adverse : la séparation réclame la confusion par un principe de permutation. Tel est le jeu du secret : un jeu sur l'identité et la différence, un jeu qui implique de 'plonger dans l'amas des semblables l'individu singulier qui en diffère afin de l'y dissimuler'. Pour cacher la différence, il faut se montrer identique, identique aux autres dont l'identité diffère. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, p. 27.

In order to conceal her Black self, Stella shows another self to the characters she keeps her secret from. Being taciturn and absent is not enough for the protection of her secret, Stella behaves like the other white women of her neighborhood to appear ordinary, and not to bring the attention on her.

Moreover, lies are not solely produced by words, as they are also produced by actions, and lack of reaction. As Arielle Meyer writes: "For a secret to exist, exclusion absolutely has to be deliberately chosen where its revelation could have occurred."[18] By choosing exclusion over disclosure, one produces a lie through their decisions, and lack of reaction. When Stella is mistaken for white and that she plays along without correcting those characters, Stella lies: "She'd gone inside some shop called Darleen's Charms, where the shopgirl mistook her for white" (Bennett, 2020, 73). This quote reveals that Stella produced a lie in two ways – one through her action, and the other through her lack of reaction. Stella indeed entered that shop while knowing that Black people were not allowed. Considering this, she entered that shop while pretending to be white. Then, when the shopgirl mistook her for white, Stella did not correct her. Although the narrative does not describe their interaction in the shop, Stella played along as she boasts about her exploits: "White folks, so easy to fool!" (73). Through that remark, Stella implicitly admits that she actually fooled the shopgirl, and played along her mistake. Stella's lies led to the existence of her secret – she purposefully dissimulated her Black identity.

Stella also lies by deceiving Loretta Walker. In his article entitled "A Process Model of Having and Keeping Secrets," Michael L. Slepian explains that "a special form of alteration used to keep a secret is when a person leads another to believe something that is not true. This is considered deception" (Slepian, 11). When Loretta asks Stella about her family, Stella leads her to believe that her family is dead: "'My folks are long gone,' she said. 'They're…' 'Oh honey, I'm so sorry'" (Bennett, 2020, 189). Stella's answer is evasive and open to interpretation. The ellipsis implicitly invites Loretta to fill in the blank in Stella's sentence, and to guess what she means. Regarding Loretta's reaction, she interprets Stella's answer as a metaphor for death – she understood that Stella's family is deceased. Considering this, Stella does not entirely produce a lie on her own, as Loretta, without being aware of it, contributes to Stella's lie through her

[18] My translation of : « Pour qu'un secret existe, il faut absolument que la mise à l'écart soit délibérément optée là où aurait pu advenir sa révélation. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, p.39.

interpretation. Stella indirectly says that her family is dead, and expects Loretta to believe so – Stella produces her lie through deception. Her metaphorical answer serves to mask and substitute the truth.

Interestingly enough, lies and substitution are not solely used to conceal race in this novel, but also to conceal gender. Before becoming Reese, the latter dissimulated his female gender with clothes, a different haircut, and a different name. That character used illusion to hide his secret. As Meyer explains in *The Spectacle of the Secret,* "to keep one's real identity away, *not saying it* is not enough, the discourse has to be *disguised*. To appear like what we are not, cross-dressed men or women, a *substitution* of gender markers systematically has to be operated."[19] To conceal his identity, Reese disguises his female body to dissimulate his female gender – he utilizes theatricality to create illusion:

> On the road from El Dorado, Therese Anne Carter became Reese. He cut his hair in Plano, hacking off inches in a truck stop bathroom with a stolen hunting knife. Outside in Abilene, he bought a blue madras shirt and a leather belt with a silver stallion buckle; the shirt he still wore, the buckle he'd pawned in El Paso when he ran out of money but mentioned wistfully, still feeling its weight hanging at his waist. In Socorro, he began wrapping his chest in a white bandage, and by Las Cruces, he'd learned to walk again, legs wide, shoulders square (Bennett, 2020, 107).

Reese's concealment of his female body progressively evolves along his spatial evolution. The more he moves away from Therese Anne Carter's hometown, the more he appears like what Therese is not – Reese. Through the dissimulation of Therese Anne, a transformation is intended as suggested by the verb "became." Reese's concealment of Therese Anne seems urgent, and unplanned, as he utilizes whatever objects and clothes he finds to accomplish his transformation, like the "stolen hunting knife" (107), the "blue madras shirt and a leather belt with a silver stallion buckle" (107), and the chest wrapping with "a white bandage" (107). His movements are also erratic, he appears to travel to haphazard locations such as "in a truck stop bathroom" (107), and

[19] My translation of : « pour tenir à l'écart la véritable identité, il ne suffit pas de *ne pas la dire,* il faut encore *déguiser* le discours ; pour paraître ce qu'on n'est pas, hommes ou femmes travestis, il faut opérer de façon systématique une *substitution* des marques du genre. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret,* p.26

demonstrates resourcefulness. Additionally, the concealment of Therese Anne seems to allow Reese to start over with Therese Anne's body as "he'd learned to walk again" (107). However, Reese does not conceal his identity as Therese because he wants to dissimulate his real identity, but because he wants to dissimulate what he does not consider his true identity. The narrator indeed claims that "by Tucson, it was Therese who felt like a costume. How real was a person if you could shed her in a thousand miles?" (Bennett, 2020, 107). Unlike the other passing characters, Reese does not lie to conceal his identity, as he actually reveals his true identity when he dissimulates Therese Anne. Since Therese "felt like a costume" (107), becoming Reese is revealing the truth – his true self. The interrogative "How real was a person if you could shed her in a thousand miles?" (107) suggests that Reese does not consider Therese Anne a real person. Considering this, Reese does not disguise his female body to protect his secret, but to sever ties with the person he is not – secrecy is not his intention, but only the consequence of his decision.

In Larsen's *Passing*, Clare also produces a lie by deception. When Clare explains to Irene how she managed to pass as white successfully, Clare says: "I might have had to provide some plausible tale to account for myself. […] But it wasn't necessary. There were my aunts, you see, respectable and authentic enough for anything or anybody" (Larsen, 1929, 25). Clare initially intended to produce a lie by inventing a story, as the noun" tale" here suggests a lie. Yet the presence of her white aunts is misleading, as it makes Clare appear white in the eyes of society. According to the concept of deception, people assume that Clare is white although she does not claim it. She does not need to specify that she is white, as she implicitly invites people to perceive her as such, through her family relationship with those white women. Unlike Stella, Clare does not invite people to fill in the blanks in her speech, yet she implicitly invites them to identify her with the same race as her white aunts.

Like Stella Vignes, Clare Kendry resorts to the process of substitution. Nevertheless, unlike Stella, Clare brings the attention on her. Clare indeed insists to appear in society, despite the risks that she runs. Clare indeed desires to attend the Negro League Welfare dance: "'Rene, suppose I come, too! It sounds terribly interesting and amusing. And I don't see why I shouldn't" (Larsen, 1929, 81). Clare is not aware of the risks that attending that event represents. Clare's priority is to have fun, not to protect her secret, as her motivations to attend the dance are entertainment and fun. Not only does Clare want to go to the dance, but she also begs Irene to invite her: "Do, 'Rene, be

polite and invite me" (Larsen, 1929, 82). The imperative verbs in "be polite" and "invite me," reinforced by the imperative auxiliary verb "do," imply that Clare orders Irene to invite her, and emphasize Clare's desire to appear in society. She does not want to withdraw from society to protect her secret, but quite the contrary, as she wants to belong to it and enjoy her privileges.

Furthermore, like Stella Vignes, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield also lie through their actions. When they encounter on the Drayton's roof, even though they never claim to be white, their simple presence in that exclusively white place makes them lie. By attending the Drayton's roof, the two protagonists implicitly state that they are white. Their attitude contributes to their lie, as they do not seem to be breaking the segregation laws. They indeed act normally, they do not seem to be concealing a secret, and to appear suspicious. Irene indeed "asked for more tea" (11), her request implies that she is confident over her lie, as her new order involves prolonging her stay on the roof. Irene does not seem worried about her lie, and does not even act as though she was lying, as she behaves like any regular white customer. Like Irene, Clare's behavior does not imply that she is lying about her true race, as Irene perceives Clare's attitude as "a certain impression of assurance" (13). Clare also appears confident despite her illegal presence on the Drayton's roof.

Clare is not the only character in Larsen's *Passing* who lies by playing along people's perception – Irene and Gertrude also do so. When the two characters meet John Bellew, the latter expresses his hatred of African Americans, and when Irene asks him if he has ever known Black people, he answers: "Thank the Lord, no! And never expect to! […] And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people" (Larsen, 1929, 44). John's intervention implies that he is not aware of being in the company of three Black women, and both Irene and Gertrude understood it. Nevertheless, they do not correct him, instead, they remain silent as Gertrude let slip "a queer little suppressed sound, a snort or a giggle" (44); and during a moment of silence, Irene "feared that her self-control was about to prove too frail a bridge to support her mounting anger and indignation" (44). Although they react to John's remark, they do not intervene to correct his mistake. Irene's reaction specifically shows that she even refrains from intervening; Irene represses her "desire to shout at the man beside her: 'And you're sitting here surrounded by three black devils, drinking tea'" (44). In this respect, Gertrude and Irene's silence implicitly confirms John's belief that he never met Black people, and also protects Clare's secret. By protecting her secret, not only do both Gertrude and Irene become accomplices in Clare's secrecy, but they also produce

their own secret. Their attitude indeed aligns with Meyer's definition of the existence of secrecy: "Exclusion absolutely has to be deliberately chosen where its revelation could have occurred."[20] Instead of revealing their true nature to John, Irene and Gertrude choose to pretend to be white around John Bellew.

Moreover, another instance of deception through silence occurs when Irene implicitly asks her taxi driver to drive her to a rooftop. The driver offers the Drayton – an exclusively white place during segregation – Irene accepts: "'Thank you. I think the Drayton'll do nicely,' she told him" (Larsen, 1929, 10). The taxi driver's offer implies that the latter identified Irene as white. Nonetheless, the latter did not correct him, instead she plays along and even goes further as she accepts his offer and thanks him. Irene's answer expresses her confidence over her lie as she overtly agrees to go to the Drayton. Moreover, the lack of hesitation in Irene's answer suggests that she intended to lie.

c) The Threat of Being Unmasked

In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and in Larsen's *Passing*, the passing characters' secret is threatened by characters who know their secret, or by the passer's actions whose consequences could unmask them. In this regard, the passing characters lose control over their secret – its protection and its revelation depend on external factors.

In Bennett's novel, Stella Vignes was initially threatened by pregnancy: "The idea of pregnancy terrified her; she imagined pushing out a baby that grew darker and darker, Blake recoiling in horror. She almost preferred him thinking that she'd had an affair with a Negro. That lie seemed kinder than the truth, momentary unfaithfulness a gentler deception than her ongoing fraud"

[20] My translation of : « il faut absolument que la mise à l'écart soit délibérément optée là où aurait pu advenir sa révélation. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, p.39.

(Bennett, 2020, 157). Stella fears to be exposed by her potentially Black baby. The verb "terrified," indicates that a Black baby could put an end to her passing. The uncertainty surrounding the baby's physical appearance represents a threat for the passer's secret. Stella imagines the worst about that pregnancy and its aftermath. Moreover, passing is portrayed as more shameful than infedility, as shown by the sentence "She almost preferred him thinking that she'd had an affair with a Negro." While having an affair is also a shame, Stella would rather be considered unfaithful by her husband, than a passer. In this regard, passing as white is perceived as the ultimate disgrace for Stella. In Stella's situation, telling another lie to Blake is a better option than revealing him the truth when the disclosure of her passing secret could have occurred.

Additionally, intimacy is a threat for Stella's secret. As I explained in "Passing as a Performance," the Rhinelander case revealed that intimacy and nakedness make one vulnerable, because secrets cannot be concealed when the naked body is exposed. Considering this, Stella may fear intimacy with Blake for this specific reason: "She [Stella] was always afraid that they might be able to read her lie, somehow, on her naked body. Maybe against white sheets, her skin would look darker […] If nakedness would not reveal who you were, then what would?" (Bennett, 2020, 246). Stella is scared of the contrast between her Black body and the white sheets, for this contrast would function as a revelation of the truth. Nakedness seems to be the ultimate test for whiteness. As suggested by the rhetorical question "If nakedness would not reveal who you were, then what would?" if Stella can appear white without artifices – pass as white with her body as her only instrument – then her secret is infallible. Before perceiving the birth of a Black baby as the ultimate disgrace and revelation of her secret, Stella considered nakedness that way: "She [Stella] could think of nothing more horrifying than not being able to hide what she wanted" (Bennett, 2020, 246). The adjective "horrifying" echoes the verb "terrified" used to describe Stella's reaction to her pregnancy. Stella's inability to control her secret intensifies her anxiety about being unmasked.

Furthermore, secrecy has a double simultaneous message: "Secrecy consists of the isolation of two simultaneous messages. The first one, identical in every case, is the statement: 'I have a secret.' In the logic of an absolute secret, this formula has to remain concealed. The second one, focuses on the content of the secret: 'my secret is…'"[21] As long as characters do not know about the

[21] My translation of : « Le secret se constitue de la mise à l'écart de deux messages simultanés. Le premier, identique dans tous les cas de figure, est l'énoncé : 'j'ai un secret.' Cette formule, dans la logique d'un secret absolu, doit rester

existence of the secret, the secret is not threatened. Nevertheless, once its existence is acknowledged, the content of the secret is likely to be discovered, as those who are aware of its existence intend to unravel the mystery. While all the white characters do not doubt Stella's sincerity, Kennedy suspects her mother to keep a secret, even though she does not know its content. Kennedy thinks that Stella's demeanor is suspicious:

> Later, Kennedy would realize how often her mother used money to avoid discussing her past, as if poverty were so unthinkable to Kennedy that it could explain everything: why her mother owned no photographs, why no friends from high school ever called, why they'd never been invited to a single wedding or funeral or reunion.
> "We were poor," her mother would snap if she asked too many questions, that poverty spreading to every aspect of her life. Her whole past, a barren pantry shelf (Bennett, 2020, 284–285).

Kennedy believes that Stella's use of poverty as a defense against her curiosity is strange. She began noticing the recurrence in her mother's answers. The metaphor "her whole past, a barren pantry shelf" reveals the incoherence that Kennedy perceived in Stella's speech, as it conveys Kennedy's sarcastic tone. Kennedy indeed subtly criticizes Stella's constant use of poverty as an excuse. Nevertheless, the adverb "later" suggests that time influences Kennedy's realization, as she started to reflect on her mother's behavior in retrospect. Stella used a subject which she considered beyond understanding for Kennedy, preventing her from prolonging the conversations. Like the supposed death of her family, poverty serves as a convenient tool for Stella's concealment as it resulted in a sort of taboo during the conversations with her daughter. The enumeration reinforced by a parallelism creates rhythm, which reflects the flood of questions that Kennedy internalized. The modal "would" conveys a habit which designates Stella's answer in direct speech. In this regard, Stella provides one specific answer to every question asked by Kennedy – it became Stella's savory answer.

Moreover, despite Stella's belief that sharing true information about her past with Kennedy when she was a child is without consequences, she actually made a mistake. Kennedy indeed

cachée. Le second, lui, porte sur le contenu du secret : 'mon secret est…' » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, p.38.

remembers the first letter of Stella's hometown, as when she asks Stella where she is from, and that the latter answers *Opelousas,* Kennedy repudiates her answer: "No it's not. You told me you were from a little town. It starts with an M. M-something. You told me when I was little" (Bennett, 2020, 186). Kennedy's question functions as a trap to test Stella's sincerity. Her purpose is to confront her mother – she begins her speech by a double negation emphasizing her rejection of Stella's answer, and carries on with evidence. Although Kennedy cannot remember the name of the hometown, she still remembers the first letter. Stella's answer confirms Kennedy's doubts about her mother's lies. Stella's lies backfired on her, as Kennedy repeats what Stella told her when she was a child.

Like Kennedy, Blake's mother also suspects Stella to keep a secret, yet she does not know its content. Her suspicion is the result of elements that she thinks to be strange about Stella's life: "No family, no friends, no former lovers. Back then, her distantness seemed dreamy. Romantic, even. But his mother said that Stella was hiding something" (Bennett, 2020, 200). The shift in the other characters' reaction to Stella's solitude, demonstrates that her invented stories produce a convincing and credible cover to her secret, but only for a short amount of time – not in the long term. The suspicions of Blake's mother also show that the lies produced by Stella do not convince all the characters she lies to. Blake's mother perceives the convenience in Stella's solitude, and suspects that she may hide a major secret. That idea is suggested by the parallelism "no family, no friends, no former lovers," reinforced by the asyndeton, which create rhythm emphasizing the idea that the lack of witnesses of Stella's past seems too good to be true in the eyes of Blake's mother. This quote reflects the way Blake's mother perceives Stella's solitude – as a façade concealing a secret.

Furthermore, settlement is incompatible with secrecy. Although Stella lied about her past, it resurfaces through the character of Jude. When Jude meets Stella during Kennedy's spectacle, she subtly attempts to bring Stella back to her Black life, and make her cease her passing. Nevertheless, Stella refuses and escapes her Black life once again: "Headlights washed over them, and for a second, bathed in yellow light, Stella looked panicked, as if she might run into the car's path. Then she clutched her purse tightly and disappeared into the night" (Bennett, 2020, 266). The scene described carries religious connotations as the yellow light Stella bathes in may correspond to God's divine light, revealing the truth. The reference to the sun and to light, echoes Stella's first

name, which means "star." Light usually serves to reveal, here the yellow light seems to reveal Stella's vulnerability in the face of Jude – a witness of her past as the daughter of Stella's twin sister. While Stella was used to live in secrecy to avoid exposure, Stella is being metaphorically exposed by Jude's presence. The light bath functions as the symbol of the revelation of Stella's secret, yet it only gives Stella a glimpse of the trouble Jude will later provoke in Stella's passing life. That is not the ultimate revelation as Stella manages to return to hiding, and the discretion that darkness offers. This scene actually foreshadows Jude's revelation of Stella's secret. Stella's reaction to Jude's offer proves that the latter is a menace to her secret. The purse here may symbolize Stella's secret; Stella's reflex to clutch her purse tightly then suggests that in the face of Jude, Stella must protect her secret, and at the same time her white life. The purse also represents her social status that she wants to protect when she clutches it tightly.

Moreover, Jude's investigation on Stella indeed threatens the latter's secret, as it leads her to intrude into Kennedy's life, and then into Stella's life, and to make the latter monitor her behavior– one of the components of secrecy analyzed by Slepian in his article. Stella's monitoring makes her adopt a suspicious and awkward behavior. Jude possesses the knowledge to reveal Stella's secret, so even before Stella becomes aware of it and knows about Jude's presence in Kennedy's life, Jude already threatens Stella's secret. Jude's investigation indirectly helps Kennedy piece together the puzzle of Stella's mysteries, and especially when she mentions her hometown: "That night, at the cast party, Jude spoke the word *Mallard* and it sounded like a song Kennedy hadn't heard in years. Ah, that's how it goes" (Bennett, 2020, 287). Jude unconsciously fills Kennedy's gap in her memory by reminding her of the name she was looking for. The interjection "ah" reflects Kennedy's satisfaction and relief at finally accessing the information she was looking for. The simile "like a song Kennedy hadn't heard in years" (287) reflects Kennedy's relief to finally be reminded of the name she was trying to remember. Although one does not recollect the lyrics of a song one has already heard, one still remembers its melody. Kennedy was in the same situation with the name of Mallard, as she could only recall the first letter until Jude told her the complete name of the town. A song that one has not heard in years usually evokes nostalgia, as it can be tied to a specific era. Considering this, when Kennedy hears the name Mallard she may feel nostalgic for the time her mother was completely honest with her.

In Larsen's novella, those who know Clare's secret represent a threat for it, as they can reveal it – consciously or unconsciously. Irene initially contributed to the protection of Clare's secret during the tea party, at which she encountered John Bellew: "In Irene, rage had not retreated, but was held by some dam of caution and allegiance to Clare" (Larsen, 1929, 45). Despite her irritation during her conversation with John, Irene has enough self-control not to reveal Clare's secret. For Irene, the protection of Clare's secret prevails over her negative emotions, and the desire to contradict John. However, Irene's attitude changed when her relationship with Clare changed, and that she was irritated by Clare's intrusion into her life. Irene considered revealing Clare's secret in order to keep her away from her life:

> She wanted to be free of her, and of her furtive comings and goings. If something would only happen, something that would make John Bellew decide on an earlier departure, or that would remove Clare. Anything. She didn't care what. Not even if it were that Clare's Margery were ill, or dying. Not even if Bellew should discover – […] Strange, she had not before realized how easily she could put Clare out of her life! But if he should somehow learn of these Harlem visits – Why should she hesitate? Why spare Clare? (Larsen, 1929, 117–118).

Irene's motivation to reveal Clare's secret is her desire to get rid of her – Irene associates Clare's exposure to her departure. Irene considers her options to obtain what she wants, yet the only one which can be perceived as the best, is the revelation of her secret to John. Irene is desperate for Clare's departure as demonstrated by the indefinite pronoun "anything," which suggests that Irene is willing to use any means to remove Clare from her life; she considers her options. The dash at the end of the phrase "Not even if Bellew should discover" suggests that Irene realized that her betrayal could be the most efficient way to provoke Clare's departure. Beyond her intention to betray Clare, Irene's determination to preserve the stability in her life is perceivable when she even imagines Clare's departure provoked by Margery's illness – Irene's selfishness leads her to cruelty. Despite Clare's trust in Irene as she shared her secret with her, Irene chooses her own well-being over race solidarity, and is even surprised of it as implied by the exclamative "Strange, she had not before realized how easily she could put Clare out of her life!". The excited tone suggested by the exclamation mark reveals that Irene is delighted to realize that she may possess the ultimate piece of information provoking Clare's departure. The adjective "strange" is framed by a dot and a

comma, and is positioned at the beginning of the exclamative. The highlight on this adjective sets the tone for the rest of the exclamative, as the adjective indicates that Irene's former desire to protect Clare's secret was an odd gesture of hers. It also suggests that she came to her senses, as she realizes that she possesses the solution to her problem since their first encounter on the Drayton's roof. The adverb "easily" reinforces this interpretation, and can also refer to the fact that the solution came to her when Clare came to her while passing.

Despite her plan for betrayal, Irene is still torn between revealing Clare's secret and not revealing it, as conveyed by the conditional phrase "but if he should somehow learn of these Harlem visits –." This phrase indeed reflects Irene's hesitation, since she thinks about the hypothetical consequence of her confession. Although the dash indicates Irene's unfinished thought, the sudden interruption in her reflection creates a dramatic tone which suggests a dire aftermath. Yet her hesitation is followed by her motifs through the questions in free indirect speech "Why should she hesitate?" and "Why spare Clare?". To convince herself to reveal Clare's secret, Irene wonders about the reasons why she should keep protecting Clare and her secret. During her reflection, Irene ultimately chooses to keep Clare's secret to herself: "But she shrank away from the idea of telling that man, Clare Kendry's white husband, anything that would lead him to suspect that his wife was Negro. Nor could she write it, or telephone it, or tell it to someone else who would tell him" (Larsen, 1929, 118). The coordinating conjunction "but" suggests an opposition with her preceding idea. Irene ultimately chooses to protect Clare's secret, as she also recoils at the idea of betraying Clare, as suggested by the verb phrase "she shrank away from the idea of telling that man." She also rejects the idea of sharing Clare's secret and indirectly provoking its ultimate revelation, as suggested by the enumeration "Nor could she write it, or telephone it, or tell it," introduced by the coordinating conjunction "nor," which stresses her incapacity to reveal Clare's secret by any means.

Moreover, like Stella Vignes, Clare Kendry's secret was threatened by pregnancy: "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark" (Larsen, 1929, 38). Clare uses the noun "terror" which has the same root as the verb "terrified" used to describe Stella's attitude during her pregnancy. Pregnancy appears to provoke the same reaction within passing women. Like for Stella, the idea that the outcome of Clare's pregnancy was

uncertain provokes fear within her, and may lead to the end of her passing. The metaphor "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months" stresses her apprehension while hyperbolizing it.

d) The Revelation of the Secret

Despite Adele, Willie Lee and Stella's silence about the latter's passing, the other Mallard inhabitants discovered Stella's secret: "'You know her sister run off, get to thinkin she white now.' 'Oh yeah,' the old man said. 'Out here livin real fine like a white lady" (Bennett, 2020, 56). Not only do the Mallard inhabitants know about Stella's passing, but they also talk about it. The inhabitants appear judgmental of Stella's decision to pass, as implied by their subtle mocking and ironic tone. The informal phrase "get to thinkin" reflects the speaker's judgment as he highlights the fact that Stella's whiteness is a result of her belief. Additionally, the association of the adverb "real" with the adjective "fine" by the old man conveys a sarcastic tone, aiming at producing a negative judgment of Stella's new lifestyle.

Moreover, when Jude reveals Stella's secret to Kennedy, Jude regrets it because she realizes that she took control over a secret which is not hers – she feels remorse: "She regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth, but by then, it was too late. She had rung the bell, and all her life, the note would hang in the air" (Bennett, 2020, 268). Jude did not intend to expose Clare, as she realized what she just did as soon as she spoke. The metaphor expresses Jude's regret over her action – her revelation would haunt her. The phrase "it was too late" signifies the irrevocability of her action – once the secret is disclosed, it can no longer be concealed.

Yet despite Kennedy's acknowledgement of her secret, Stella still attempts to conceal it:

> At first, her mother refused to engage with Jude's claims. Then she tried reason. Do I look like a Negro? Do you? Does it make any sense that we could be related to her? No, it didn't, but little about her mother's life made sense. Where had she come from? What was her life like before she'd gotten married? Who had she been, who had she loved,

> what had she wanted? The gaps. When she looked at her mother now, she only saw the gaps. And Jude, at least, had offered her a bridge, a way to understand (Bennett, 2020, 288).

Stella's first reaction actually confirms the existence of her secret, as Arielle Meyer explains that "refusal signifies, at best, the presence of the secret, at worst, it reveals its content."[22] Paradoxically, Stella remains silent to implicitly refute Jude's revelations, and pretend that she has nothing to hide. Nevertheless, her denial of the situation makes her even more suspicious – she realized it and utilized manipulation as her defense. Stella indeed attempts to manipulate Kennedy to convince her that she has no secret. However, since Kennedy has always suspected her mother to hide some information, Jude's revelations provide her the answers she had been seeking. Through the questions "Do I look like a Negro? Do you? Does it make any sense that we could be related to her?" Stella manipulates Kennedy by shedding light on the seemingly evidence of Jude's lies. She expects her daughter to see what she wants her to see – that she is white. Jude's rhetorical questions "Where had she come from? What was her life like before she'd gotten married? Who had she been, who had she loved, what had she wanted?" serve as an answer to Stella's, as she highlights Stella's mysteries. Kennedy's questions aim at devaluing Stella's questions, and at proving that they lack significance since Stella is a passer – since appearances are not inherently relatable. The sentence "And Jude, at least, had offered her a bridge, a way to understand" demonstrates that Kennedy is in search of truth – truth that her mother refuses to provide her with. In this respect, Kennedy does not believe her mother. Kennedy's reaction suggests that she is not mad at her mother because she is passing, but because she lied to her. By not sharing her secret with Kennedy, Stella underestimated Kennedy's capacity to understand her. Stella's secrecy created a gap between her and her daughter.

Nevertheless, Kennedy's discovery may have slightly relieved Stella, who secretly desires to be unmasked during her permanent passing. Stella's desire is expressed twice in the novel. Although the revelation of the secret marks its failure, since a secret is meant to be hidden, the passer is relieved. In their article entitled "A Close Look at Revealing Secrets and Some

[22] My translation of : « Le refus désigne au mieux la présence du secret, au pire il en révèle la teneur » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, p.42.

Consequences That Follow," Walid A. Afifi and John P. Caughlin discuss the impact of secrecy on secret's keepers. The authors analyze the consequences of disclosure: "Like fever can help 'break' physical infection, disclosure, according to Stiles (1995), tends to relieve distress" (Afifi & Caughlin, 470). The comparison between the effects of a fever on one's health and the effects of disclosure on secret's keepers, suggests that the revelation of a secret may be the worst step in secrecy, yet the secret's keepers benefit from the consequences.

Kennedy's discovery deepened the divide between her and her mother at first. However, Stella is relieved that her daughter knows her true self: "'You can ask me what you'd like' […] 'But when we get home –' 'I know, I know,' her daughter said. 'I can't say anything.' 'It hurts to talk about,' she said. 'You understand? But I want you to know me'" (Bennett, 2020, 348). That scene contrasts with all the times that Stella avoided Kennedy's questions. Stella is now willing to open up, and tell the truth to Kennedy. Yet she still asks her daughter to hide the truth from Blake, who is symbolically referred to as "home." The dash indicates that Kennedy interrupts Stella. She lets her know that she is aware of the stakes, as suggested by the repetition of "I know, I know," stressing Kennedy's desire to prove to her mother that the latter can be reassured. Kennedy carries on by completing her mother's sentence. Stella shares her pain with Kennedy, and subtly seeks her empathy, as revealed by the question "You understand?". Despite Stella's emotional obstacles, she ultimately confesses her desire for honesty as suggested by the sentence "But I want you to know me." This statement contrasts with the negativity surrounding the narration of her story to Kennedy, as highlighted by the conjunction "but."

The narrator mentions Stella's first time desiring for disclosure when Loretta Walker reads the palms of her hands: "Loretta smiled, and again, Stella wondered if she knew. Maybe the whole time, Loretta had just been playing along. The thought was humiliating but strangely liberating" (Bennett, 2020, 190–191). Stella's desire for disclosure is so intense, that she believes she detects understanding on her co-speaker's face, whereas it is not – Stella misinterprets Loretta's smile as a sign of her discovery of her secret, rather than simply an expression of delight. Stella's misinterpretation leads her to venture the hypothesis that Loretta herself concealed the fact that she acknowledged Stella's secret, as implied by the adverb "maybe." The humiliation that Stella feels at the idea that Loretta knew her secret is outweighed by her sense of liberation. Yet she does not

appear to understand her relief, as suggested by the adverb "strangely," which conveys the idea that Stella's reaction is surprising to her.

The second time Stella desires to be unmasked is by her husband, when she mentions Jude to Blake, and secretly expects him to understand who Jude is. Being unmasked rather than revealing the truth, seems easier for Stella: "She watched his face the entire time, waiting to see it change. A flicker of recognition, maybe. Relief that a question he'd always wondered had finally been answered. But he just scoffed, unbuttoning his dress shirt" (Bennett, 2020, 273–274). Stella observes Blake's reaction to her story, expecting him to connect the dots, and grasp the hints about her secret. Although the reactions that Stella expects from Blake seem to reflect her apprehension, her attitude actually reveals her desire for exposure. The last sentence of that quote conveys Stella's disappointed tone, as implied by the association of the conjunction "but" and the adverb "just" – Blake's reaction fails to meet Stella's expectations. She was expecting that story about Jude to mark the end of her permanent passing.

As for Reese, he is not the one who reveals his secret to Barry. Barry indeed discovers it by himself, yet Reese does not attempt to protect his secret by lying. The discovery of his secret does not represent a threat for him, as he does not risk to lose some privileges like Stella and Clare do. The discovery of Reese's secret by Barry is indeed without consequences: "'You're a transsexual,' Barry said. 'I know exactly what you are'" (Bennett, 2020, 145). Barry's tone is neutral, he does not appear shocked, angry or disgusted by Reese's secrecy. Barry seems to simply identify the nature of Reese's secret, but he does not judge him. Barry's intervention may implicitly help Reese in his secret journey, and complete Reese's secret, as Barry indicates him that a word exists to describe him. Reese's reaction reveals how Barry's statement complemented his secret: "Reese had never heard the word before – he hadn't even known that there was a word to describe him" (Bennett, 2020, 145). Reese's metamorphosis made him conceal his former identity, yet he does not seem to realize that the transformation he went through is not an isolated experience. Barry's revelation demonstrates that the disclosure of a secret is not necessarily a negative experience, and that the consequences are not necessarily tragic like Clare's.

Reese reveals his secret to Jude. However, the narrative does not describe the passage where Reese tells his past to Jude. The readers understand that Reese shared his secret with Jude through

her reaction: “Now, as he watched the photo, she watched him, trying to picture Therese. But she couldn’t. She only saw Reese, scruffy face, shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, that loop of hair always falling onto his forehead” (Bennett, 2020, 109). After Reese’s confession, Jude attempts to recognize Reese’s concealed identity. Yet despite acknowledging Reese’s secret, she cannot perceive what Reese was dissimulating. The adverb “only” in “she only saw Reese,” implies that Reese’s secret no longer exists, as Therese Anne is not merely concealed, but has vanished. Therese Anne ceased to exist and Reese is the sole person inhabiting the body which was once Therese Anne’s, as shown by the enumeration “scruffy face, shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, that loop of hair always falling onto his forehead,” which reveals Jude’s perception of Reese.

Nevertheless, despite the trust that Reese placed in Jude when he decided to share his secret with her, he still desires to keep some privacy, and rejects Jude’s curiosity:

> Then one evening in July, she came home early from work and found Reese shirtless through the open bathroom door. His chest was wrapped in a large bandage […]. Her first thought was her stupidest thought: someone had attacked him. When he glanced up, their eyes met in the mirror, and he quickly yanked on his shirt.
> “Don’t creep up on me like that,” he said.
> “What happened?” she said. “That bruise –”
> “Looks worse than it feels,” he said. “I’m used to it.”
> She slowly realized what he was trying to tell her: that no one had attacked him, that it was the bandage he wore that was digging into his ribcage, bruising him.
> “You should take that thing off,” she said. “If it hurts you. You don’t have to wear it here. I don’t care what you look like.’
> She thought he might be relieved, but instead, a dark and unfamiliar look passed across his face.
> “It’s not about you,” he said, then he slammed the bathroom door shut (Bennett, 2020, 122–123).

Jude is positioned as a distant observer, as she observes him “through the open bathroom door.” Her attitude suggests that she tries to understand Reese’s transformation and his secret. Despite her curiosity, Jude fails to grasp all the means utilized by Reese to conceal Therese Anne, and feels bad about that, as suggested by the adjective in the superlative form “stupidest.” The adjective

reflects Jude's frustration, and her helplessness. In addition, Reese demonstrates some prudishness, as he covers his body when he acknowledges Jude observing him, and shuts himself away when Jude questions him. Reese is not receptive to Jude's curiosity about his transsexuality, as he seems irritated and expresses his desire for privacy when he slams the door.

In Larsen's *Passing*, Irene is the cause for the revelation of Clare's secret. Irene may have exposed Clare's passing both unintentionally and intentionally, despite reconsidering her decision to betray her. The narrator may suggest that Irene had the intention to reveal Clare's secret, as they claim: "As if in answer to her wish, the very next day Irene came face-to-face with Bellew" (Larsen, 1929, 119). The narrator seems to support the idea that Irene actually desired Clare to be unmasked. The hypothetical condition "as if in answer to her wish" carries an ironic tone, as it suggests that Irene's encounter with Bellew is the result of spiritual practices – the result of Irene's manifestation. Moreover, the seemingly spiritual nature of Irene's wish is implied by the immediacy of its fulfilment, as it came true "the very next day."

Irene does not reveal Clare's secret simply by running into Bellew, while accompanied by her Black friend, but rather through her lack of reaction – by not signaling to Felise that they are facing Clare's oblivious husband. Irene's silence may have been intentional. Irene indeed admits that she may have indirectly withheld the desire to disclose Clare's secret, as "Irene was thinking: 'I had my chance and didn't take it. I had only to speak and to introduce him to Felise with the casual remark that he was Clare's husband'" (Larsen, 1929, 120–121). Irene feels remorse about her reaction to her unexpected encounter with Bellew, the adverb "only" implies that Irene could have easily protected Clare's secret by handling the situation with composure and neutrality.

Additionally, Irene decides to keep the secret about her encounter with John and her indirect revelation. This secrecy solely serves Irene's own interest, as it fulfils her wish to be done with Clare: "Irene was conscious of a feeling of relieved thankfulness at the thought that she was probably rid of Clare, and without having lifted a finger or uttered one word" (Larsen, 1929, 121). This quote reflects Irene's satisfaction for obtaining what she wants without purposefully betraying Clare. Despite the uncertainty surrounding Clare's future, as implied by the adverb "probably" – now that Bellew discovered her secret – Irene is still pleased by the idea that Clare may leave town and her life. Irene does not want Clare to know about the end of her passing as she renounces to

warn her, and she cannot manage to share her secret with Brian, since she thinks that "it sounded too much like the warning she wanted it to be" (122). In this respect, Irene associates the revelation of her secret about her encounter with Bellew with a warning. Therefore, by refusing to share it with Brian, she purposefully prevents Clare from receiving this warning. Not only is Irene the one who ends Clare's secret, but she also takes control over Clare's fate by withholding this piece of information. Irene's secret is intertwined with Clare's. Despite Bellew's silence during the chance encounter, the weather of the day following it foreshadows the definitive end of Clare's passing, as "the next morning brought with it a snowstorm that lasted throughout the day" (Larsen, 1929, 125). The weather here functions as a pathetic fallacy, as it foreshadows the violent end of Clare's passing. Storms destroy and sweep things violently away in its path, snow symbolizes Clare's passing through its whiteness– the snowstorm prefigures Clare's last day as a passing woman. Additionally, the fact that the snowstorm "lasted throughout the day," suggests that the storm symbolically heralds the tragedy destined to occur that night.

After John Bellew's discovery, he confronts her at Felise's. Bellew receives confirmation of what he understood the day before through Clare's lack of reaction:

> "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger" […] Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full red lips, and in her shining eyes –" (Larsen, 1929,136–137).

Through her silence, Clare actually confirms the veracity of the information John possesses about her, since as Arielle Meyer states: "in some cases silence indeed serves as a confession."[23] Clare's lack of reaction functions as her confirmation of Bellew's discovery. In addition, the narrator appears more concerned by John Bellew's discovery than Clare herself, as revealed by the accumulation reinforced by comparisons "Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her." It demonstrates that Clare is unaware of the details shared by the narrator,

[23] My translation of : « dans certains cas le fait de ne pas répondre revient en effet à avouer. » Meyer, Arielle. *Le Spectacle du Secret*, p.42.

since the comparisons describe what Clare does not perceive. The ironic tone in those comparisons highlights the contrast between Clare's composure and the agitation around her. Clare's attitude reflects her relief at the idea of being done with her passing, as implied by her "faint smile" and her "shining eyes." Clare's reaction suggests that she may also have withheld the desire to be unmasked – to be freed from secrecy and the burden of racial passing.

In Morrison's "Recitatif," the process of secrecy is reversed, as the narrator reveals the content of the secret – one character is white, and the other is Black – yet she does not reveal which character is related to which part of the secret. Paradoxically, Morrison encourages her readers to discover it by themselves. Nevertheless, it is possible that neither Morrison nor Twyla, the narrator, have the answer. Morrison designated her short story as an experiment, as noted by Zadie Smith in the introduction to Morrison's short story: "When she [Morrison] called 'Recitatif' an 'experiment' she meant it. The subject of the experiment is the reader" (Smith, 2022, ix). As such, and despite the fact that the readers are the subjects, it does not prove that they are the sole subjects of that experiment. Nothing proves that Morrison wrote this short story with the intention to attribute Twyla and Roberta fixed races – she may have written that one of the protagonists is white, and the other Black to solely mislead the readers.

Considering this, the mystery remains as Morrison never shared the extent of her knowledge about the two protagonists. It is possible that that secret is meant to remain undiscovered, otherwise its disclosure would interfere with the purpose of Morrison's short story. Additionally, despite the fact that a younger version of the narrator is one of the subjects of the secret, she may not have the answer to the race question neither, as the narrative reveals that her perception of race and her memories are not accurate – she is not reliable: "When I thought about it I actually couldn't be certain" (Morrison, 1983, 36). This quote reveals that the narrator Twyla has a poor recalling ability. She fails to identify Maggie's race because Roberta made her doubt her memories of her.

In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and in Larsen's *Passing,* the strategies and the processes of secrecy are more or less equivalent. Both Clare and Stella withhold the same desires and fear the end of their passing. Despite the discovery of their secret by some characters, they both feel relieved and freed from the burden of secrecy that passing requires. In Morrison's "Recitatif," the process of secrecy is reversed and the secret shared by Morrison is paradoxically meant to be both

discovered and undiscoverable. Yet nothing proves that Morrison and the narrator Twyla conceal the truth, as they probably do not know the protagonists' races either.

Although the disclosure of the passing characters' secrets provokes relief within her, the latter are ultimately punished for their dishonesty and the rejection of their true nature.

3) Reinventing the Tradition

In *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett portrays traditional racial passing through the character of Stella Vignes, while appropriating and exploring gender passing through the characters of Barry and Reese. This renewal aligns with Bennett's contemporary society, where gender boundaries are more publicly crossed. Although passing is usually punished, Bennet does not intend to do so. She offers a new perspective of race line crossing and its aftermath, and offers a new timeline for passing.

Nella Larsen's novella *Passing* was published in 1929, when the tradition of passing novels gained prominence in the context of the Harlem Renaissance. She indeed explores recurrent themes: "Larsen ticks off a whole repertoire of recurrent thematic aspects in interracial literature such as fingernails as a racial sign (14), the curse of Ham (26), or the biracial mother's fear of giving birth to a darker-skinned descendant (38)" (Sollors, 24). Yet, this work does not solely inscribe itself in the tradition of passing novels. Larsen also challenges the tradition through the characters of Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, while giving an insight into the complexity of racial passing. Although Clare's passing results in a tragic ending, that event may not be solely interpreted as punishment in the novella.

Toni Morrison aims at deconstructing her reader's interpretation of race through her short story "Recitatif." To achieve this, she appropriates the passing novel by being the one to make her characters pass both as white and Black – her short story breaks with traditional passing novels. Unlike Bennett and Larsen, Morrison does not critique the practice of racial passing, rather she critiques society's construct of race – she uses passing as a critique instrument. Yet the three authors portray race as an unstable concept. As a mirror of the readers, Twyla and Roberta are punished by the acknowledgement of their ignorance, and of their stereotypes.

a) Shades of Passing and the Different Forms of Condemnation in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

Stella is from a lineage of "mulattoes," as such, she was expected to be tormented by her dual racial heritage, which questions the status quo of race, and allows her to cross racial boundaries. The transmission of that mixed heritage throughout the generations paradoxically privileged the Mallard inhabitants, who are satisfied with their racial in-betweenness. While "mulattoes" are tormented by their dual racial heritage, Alphonse Decuir, and his descendants, privilege their white ancestry, as they covet ultimate lightness. They also reject their Blackness, as they "refused to be treated like Negroes" (Bennett, 2020, 6). By making the difference between themselves and those "Negroes," they create a gap, and suggest that they do not identify as "Negroes." The creation of that "third place" (6), defies the societal construct of race, and racial boundaries.

In her article entitled "Defying the Binaries of Passing in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*," Maaike Siemes analyzes the function of Mallard in the novel: "From this liminal place, citizens undermine the normalized knowledges of the Jim Crow era and pose a threat to the racial hierarchy" (Siemes, 158). Mallard is a space for transition from a homogenic Black race, to a binary Black race. Considering this, Mallard falls under myth: "Colored people whispered about it, wondered about it. White people couldn't believe it even existed" (Bennett, 2020, 6). Both Black and white people question the existence of such a place, which exists outside racial boundaries. The white people's reaction gives a mythical dimension to Mallard, as their reluctance to believe in its existence relies on the fact that they cannot see it. The modal "could" in the negative form does not suggest that they refuse to believe in the existence of Mallard, rather that they are incapable to do so, because of a lack of visual evidence. The whispers also suggest that the existence of that town sparks rumors – like myths, rumors are usually the result of an invention.

Like Slavery, Mallard privileges racial hierarchies, where white people are at the top, dark-skinned Black people are at the bottom, and where "mulattoes" stand in-between. Mallard's creation in 1848, even anticipates segregation, while establishing the separation of races. Yet that locus exists in the margins of society – Mallard does not even appear on any maps (85). Mallard can be considered a self-created society, which aligns with the inhabitants' ideologies. Their

ideologies mostly consist in colorism, which reveals their internalization of whiteness through the reproduction of whites' hierarchy. In their article "Skin Color and Colorism: Global Research, Concepts, and Measurement," Angela R. Dixon and Edward E. Telles explore global research about skin color in literature in relation to race and racism, the concept of colorism, and the impact of colonization. They define colorism: "Scholars of the West often trace light-skin color preferences, sometimes called colorism, to the origins of race and racism associated with European colonization, Western slavery, and white supremacy" (Dixon & Telles, 406). The reproduction of racism within the Black community, and the establishment of a hierarchy placing light-skinned non-white people at the top of the Black community, reveals Mallard inhabitants' desire to align with whiteness, rather than embrace their Black ancestry. When the twins leave their hometown, they integrate society, and make a decision between perpetuating Mallard's traditions or be in rupture with them.

Despite the establishment of an in-between race, the Mallard inhabitants are reminded of the racism against them: "But even here, where nobody married dark, you were still colored and that meant that white men could kill you […] The Vignes twins were reminders of this, tiny girls in funeral dresses who grew up without a daddy because white men decided that it would be so" (Bennett, 2020, 38). The narrator appears to be willing to lecture the characters, since the narrator's tone suggests that they do not want the Mallard inhabitants to forget that a light complexion does not grant them whiteness. Through their control over the Mallard inhabitants' life, white people are portrayed as superior beings. Despite their decision to live separate from white people, their life still seems not to belong to them – those white people owning Leon Vignes's life reminds Slavery. Leon Vignes's death demonstrates that the "mulatto" race that Alphonse Decuir invented is a social construct – for white people, the line that Alphonse Decuir created does not exist since they equally treat dark-skinned Black people and light-skinned Black people.

Mallard's ideologies are also debunked by the segregation of the cemetery. Paradoxically, during their lifetime, the Mallard inhabitants live under their own segregation rules which separate them from dark-skinned Black people and white people, yet at their death, they are reduced to the Jim Crow laws and are treated like the "Negroes" they refused to be. In this respect, Mallard functions as a heterotopia for those "mulattoes." Like St. Bonaventure in Morrison's "Recitatif," Mallard is a heterotopia of deviation: "that is to say, the places that operate at the margins of

society, in the desolate shores that surround it, are instead reserved for individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the average or the required norm" (Vidler, 20). Since Alphonse Decuir was rejected by both white and Black people, his binary nature makes him a "deviant" in the eyes of society. When Adele Vignes is buried on the Black side of the cemetery, she is deprived of her binary racial nature and reintegrates society as a non-deviant, for she is identified as Black – no longer as a "mulatto":

> Adele Vignes was buried on the colored side of St. Paul's Cemetery. Nobody expected any different. This was the way it had always been, the white folks in the north side, the colored folks in the south. Nobody complained until the year the Eucharistic ministers at the white church that owned the cemetery cleaned tombstones for All Souls Day but only on the north side (Bennett, 2020, 365).

The Mallard inhabitants are aware of their reintegration into the segregated American society at their death, as implied by the sentence "Nobody expected any different." Paradoxically, the inhabitants protest for racial equality for deceased people. The Mallard inhabitants tolerate the segregation of the cemetery, but not being refused access to the same privileges as white people. This proves that Mallard's ideologies exist and are valuable solely in Mallard. Through death, the verb "passing" implies a transformation – one still undergoes a transition from life to death. The idea that death is a transformation is conveyed through Jude's study of cadavers at medical school: "He'd lived and died a completely different man, one they would never know beyond the details inscribed on his chart" (Bennett, 2020, 349). Like that dead man, Adele lived and died "completely different," as she lived as a "mulatta" but died as a Black woman – death made her cross the race line which separated dark-skinned Black people and "mulattoes."

Desiree's story shows that one's departure from Mallard is not necessarily definitive, like Stella's. Desiree indeed returns to Mallard after marrying a dark-skinned man and having a dark-skinned daughter. However, Desiree is abused by her husband, which leads her to leave him and return to her hometown with her daughter – Mallard functions as a shelter for "mulattoes." Desiree's experience in society resulted in a failure and in her return to the heterotopia of Mallard. The narrative appeared to suggest that the hatred of dark-skinned Black people in Mallard is ingrained, for Jude's violent father justifies it: "*Of course that dark man beat you. What you expect?*

A spite marriage don't last" (Bennett, 2020, 18). The use of italics in the narrative may emphasize the collective judgment – all the Mallard inhabitants perceive that marriage in the same way. The visual effect produced by italics may also suggest the deviant nature of that marriage according to Mallard's traditions. The adverbial phrase "of course" reveals Adele Vignes and the other Mallard inhabitants' lack of surprise about the outcome of Desiree's marriage. The adverbial phrase suggests that Desiree's fate was inevitable in the eyes of Mallard inhabitants; this idea is further reinforced by the rhetorical question "*What you expect?*". Additionally, the repetition of the /r/, /p/, and of the /d/ sounds, in association with the monosyllable words "dark" "beat," and "don't," create an abrupt and jerky rhythm which echoes the blows inflicted to Desiree.

Nonetheless, through the perceived immutability of the Mallard inhabitants' ideologies, especially Adele's, the narrative deceives the readers, for the latter progressively abandons her stereotypes. As I explained in "Navigating Races," Adele initially despises Jude's skin color and its meaning in her eyes – she used to perceive dark skin as evil. Yet Desiree's return with a dark-skinned child provokes change in mentalities in Mallard, as explained by Guy Rolland Akre in his article:

> However, nonconformity to her folk's philosophy and skin-tone preference and affiliation places Desiree on a self-reinvention path as she reappears in Mallard with her dark-skinned child. Indeed, her going to New Orleans and her subsequent union and child with Sam who is a Black man are facts that undoubtedly break with social conventions held in her hometown Mallard where they do not marry dark-skinned people (Akre, 455).

Desiree's self-reinvention provokes reinvention in her lineage. Not only does she deviate from Decuir's perception of the perfect Black individual, but she also progressively allows the acceptance of dark skins in her family. Over the years, Adele no longer perceives Jude as malicious because of her skin color, yet Jude's dark complexion still disturbs her. When Jude asks her for help to get rid of her dark complexion, Adele does not hesitate: "All week, her grandmother created potions. She poured baths with lemon and milk and instructed Jude to soak. She pasted honey masks on her face, then slowly peeled them off. She juiced oranges, mixed them with spices, and applied the mixture to Jude's face before she went to bed" (Bennett, 2020, 110). Adele's

determination and persistence, revealed by the adverbial phrase "All week," and the numerous "potions" that she created, reflect her desire to offer a light complexion to Jude, which would align with Mallard's beauty standards. Her assistance to Jude could be interpreted as an act of love – a way to help her integrating in Mallard – yet, rather than teaching her to appreciate her skin color, Adele's reaction and her lack of hesitation suggest that she would prefer Jude not to be associated with a dark complexion.

Interestingly enough, Adele ultimately becomes race-blind, as Early's dark skin no longer disturbs her. When Adele has Alzheimer, she momentarily forgets Early and believes that she is related to him: "'Are you my son?' Adele asked. […] 'You not my husband, are you?'" (Bennett, 2020, 333–334). Adele appears not to be aware of his dark skin, and of Mallard's ideologies that she herself used to share. Her unawareness is highlighted by the fact that she considers being Early's mother, which implies that she may have had a child with a dark-skinned man. This idea is further reinforced when she believes to be married with him. Adele's race-blindness, once she forgets her hometown's ideologies, solely aligns with the idea that race is a social construct.

Despite the fact that Stella is condemned to live in secrecy, tormented by insecurity, she does not appear to be punished in the narrative. As I explained in this thesis, Stella suffers some consequences of her passing, such as solitude, acting, and the burden of secrecy. Yet her decision to pass as white is ultimately not punished, for she is able to continue her passing performance despite Kennedy's discovery, who now keeps Stella's secret from her father. She continues to access white privileges, and now that Kennedy acknowledges her secret, Stella is rid of the solitude that she attempted to fight during her passing, thanks to "her daughter, who would forever be the only person in her life who really knew her" (Bennett, 2020, 348). Kennedy's discovery does not widen the gap between mother and daughter, on the contrary, both obtained what they desired – Kennedy unraveled the mystery surrounding her mother, while Stella could now share her secret. Furthermore, when Stella leaves her hometown and starts her passing, she perpetuates Mallard's ideologies in society. She is even rewarded with the most coveted tone in Mallard. Kennedy is indeed the "more perfect Negro" (6) that Alphonse Decuir imagined. Both Jude and Kennedy can be perceived as the embodiment of their respective mothers' ideologies – Jude as the rejection of Mallard's standards, and Kennedy as the perpetuation of Mallard's coveted lightness.

Stella is not punished, but her actions are repudiated by Jude who confesses to her mother: "'I'm glad you're not like her,' her daughter said. 'I'm glad I ended up with you'" (Bennett, 2020, 364). The repetition of "I'm glad" highlights Jude's gratefulness for her mother's choice not to pass as white. For Jude, Stella is not an example to follow. Jude's intervention reflects her relief for not having lived a life of lies, and confused racial identity.

Although she did not live the long and soft life she was destined to as a Decuir, Adele's death is not a penalty, rather a symbol of renewal. In his article entitled "Death in Literature," Joseph Carroll identifies the reasons for writing about death in literature, and how it transcribes the authors' fear of dying. Carroll describes death as abrupt, and perceives it as a definitive end: "Once we die, whatever we might have done, or should have done, or should not have done, can never again be altered – either realized or rectified" (Carroll, 139). Adele's death contrasts with this description, as it is not the end of her accomplishments, nor does it symbolize the impossibility for rectifications, rather the opposite, since her death marks the perspective of a new beginning. Moreover, she dies peacefully: "It wasn't painful. She was smiling and talkin to me, right up until the end" (Bennett, 2020, 350). In this quote, the "end" could be polysemic, as it could refer to Adele's death, but it could also refer to the end of an era – of a generation. Through that euphemism and Adele's painless passing, Desiree tones her death down, which makes death not negative. This idea is reinforced by Adele's attitude which is positive and calm. Besides her positive attitude, Adele talks to Desiree, which can be symbolically interpreted as a transmission. Desiree indeed appears passive in the face of Adele, who is the one talking and sharing.

Adele's death marks a rebirth – the perspective of a new generation. Jude does not align with Mallard's traditions and ideologies, as she embodies what Alphonse Decuir rejected – Blackness. However, despite her dark skin, she is ultimately rewarded with independence, as I analyzed in this thesis, and reconciliation with her dark skin. In his article "Self-reinvention in *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett," Guy Roland Akre develops the idea that, initially, Jude despises her dark-skinned Black body. He writes: "to her [Jude], beauty is white or by default light, the low self-esteem that she develops coupled with the skewed view of the world that she has of herself because of the barrage of stereotypes directing towards her via her skin color took a huge toll on her soul and trouble her identity" (Akre, 461). Jude is ashamed of her dark skin because she internalized Mallard's ideologies and beauty standards. Her renouncement to uncovering her Black

body reveals that she does not perceive herself as beautiful, because she does not have a light complexion.

In Mallard, and even afterwards in Los Angeles, Jude is scared to expose her body: "In Mallard, she [Jude] never dared to swim in the river – imagine showing so much of yourself. She wasn't in Mallard anymore, but somehow, the town wouldn't leave her. Even now at Venice Beach, she pictured sunbathers laughing as soon as she tugged off her shirt" (Bennett, 2020, 132). The verb "dared" does not suggest that Jude refused to swim in the river, rather it means that she anticipated mockery by refraining from doing so. Jude is not worried about the swim, but about the exposure of her dark-skinned body, as revealed by the clause "imagine showing so much of yourself," highlighted by its frame formed by a dash and a dot. This framed clause also implies that Jude cannot consider showing more skin than her clothes reveal. In addition, the fact that she still does not dare to expose her body outside Mallard demonstrates that her experience in Mallard traumatized her.

Furthermore, her wish to lighten her skin with her grandmother's "potions" reflects her internalization of Mallard's ideologies. In her article "Colorism, Passing for White, and Intertextuality in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*: Rewriting African American Women's Literary Tradition," Mónica García Morgado discusses the tradition established in African American literature of revisiting African American fictions, which results in recurrent patterns and tropes. One of those patterns is to tackle the subject of beauty standards among the Black community. The author states:

> Hegemonic westernized beauty standards may cause what Ronald E. Hall coined the Bleaching Syndrome in 1990. According to Hall, this syndrome is a response to racial domination that has prompted a part of the African American community to internalize light skin and other dominant race characteristics as the ideal point of reference for normal assimilation into American society (García Morgado, 83).

By desiring to erase her dark skin, Jude suffers from the "Bleaching Syndrome," as she desires to align with Mallard's beauty standards. The attempt to lighten her skin, reflects her attempt to reject her true nature, and functions as a response to the "racial domination" established by the Mallard inhabitants towards dark-skinned people.

Along with Adele's shift in her perception of dark complexions, the character of Jude serves to celebrate Black beauty in the narrative. Jude's ultimate acceptance of her dark complexion contrasts with Alphonse Decuir's beauty standards, and with the practice of passing, which aligns with white beauty standards. Jude ultimately ends her cycle of hatred of her dark skin and internalized Mallard's beauty standards, by swimming in the river she was scared to swim in in Mallard: "He [Reese] unzipped her funeral dress, folding it neatly on a rock, and they waded into the cold water, squealing, water inching up their thighs. This river, like all rivers, remembered its course" (Bennett, 2020, 366). By taking off that dress and being vulnerable through the process of uncovering her skin, Jude rejects the condemnation she imposed on herself by dissimulating her body all her life. Jude's bath in the river in Mallard symbolizes her total acceptance of her dark skin and her emotional rejuvenation. She cleanses herself of trauma and becomes a younger version of herself, who can now bathe in the same river she once avoided out of fear and shame. The funeral dress symbolizes Adele's death, which paves the way for a new generation of transgressive Decuirs who sever ties with their condemnations – self-imposed or not. The river's memory suggests a transmission – it remembers the past, but it will also remember the present moment. Therefore, Jude's action also paves the way for new ideologies. The presence of Reese is in the continuity of their journey together, for he has been acting as a companion and a mentor for Jude, by helping her to accept herself after struggling with self-acceptance.

b) Classic Passing and Renewal of the Punishment Tradition in Larsen's *Passing*

In Larsen's *Passing*, racial passing is condemned. As I explained in "Navigating Races," Clare is a mulatta, and like Stella Vignes, she embodies the possibility to cross the racial line and to question the status quo. According to the literary tradition, as a mulatta, Clare inscribes herself

in the tradition of the *Tragic Mulatto*. Clare indeed enjoys her ability to cross racial lines as a character of mixed heritage, yet her passing ends with her death.

Depending on the readers' interpretation of her death, Clare can be interpreted as being punished or not. Clare reconnected with her Black self just before attending the party –during the climb of the staircase. As I analyzed in the pages about loss, for Clare, climbing stairs is significant, as it is the representation of her appropriation of the things she covets – Clare seeks Blackness throughout the novella, and she ultimately reconciles with her Black identity. Not only does Clare evoke her past as a Black girl while mentioning her Black father, but she also reaches Felise Freeland's apartment which is "at the very top" (134). Her apartment symbolizes Heaven, since as Felise's surname indicates, those who attain that place are free. In this respect, by entering Felise's apartment after the recollection of her past, Clare is ultimately freed from passing as she is now Black, as developed by Jennifer DeVere Brody: "Moments before her death, Clare is the epitome of composure. This last vision of Clare suggests that she went to her death knowingly and perhaps proudly as a Black Woman" (Brody, 1063). Clare's attitude reflects her contentment for reconnecting with her Black self, yet it can also be viewed as acting.

If some readers believe that Clare falls, she may have been condemned by the author not to enjoy her rediscovered Blackness, and her freedom, as she potentially falls from Heaven. Nevertheless, although the three options are credible regarding the ambiguity of the ending, which offers the possibility for different interpretations, the conflicting theories of her suicide and of her murder may be the most acceptable ones. Larsen's novella indeed explores the paradoxical and complex relationship between Clare and Irene, while reinventing passing. Considering this, Clare's supposed fall may contrast with the complexity of the narrative, and reduce the ending to traditional punishment since, as explained by Brit Bennett in her introduction to *Passing*, "the narrative penalty of passing is often misery or death" (Bennett, 2021, xvii). Since Larsen deceives appearances in her work, she may intentionally give the impression that Clare's death is her punishment for passing, whereas the passing which is actually condemned is Irene's – through Clare's death and its impact on Irene.

If some readers think that Clare commits suicide, her death may not be punishment, but rather, the accomplishment of her freedom. As an actor, her suicide may serve as the curtain closing

of her passing performance. The window may symbolize the curtain that Clare passes to leave her stage. Clare indeed seems ready to leave the stage as she "stood at the window" (135) and is emotional, as suggested by her "faint smile on her full red lips, and in her shining eyes" (136). Clare's attitude appears like a farewell to her audience. Moreover, her Black body in the white snow may function as the ultimate disclosure of her secret – she has agency over her race. The white snow may also symbolize purity – by committing suicide Clare rejected her status of mulatta, and became pure, as she now solely belongs to one race.

Yet, some readers consider that Irene murdered Clare, and therefore through this action, Irene positions herself as Clare's judge – she assumes that Clare does not deserve to be free, for her freedom would impact Irene's life: "She couldn't have her [Clare] free" (Larsen, 1929, 137). Clare's freedom has an impact on Irene's life, that the latter rejects. Irene's reaction to the tragic event suggests that Clare's death is convenient for her, as now that Clare is gone, Irene hastens to reclaim what Clare took from her – Brian and what he symbolizes. Irene indeed "took up his [Brian's] coat" (138), and like Brian went down to Clare when he symbolically chose her over Irene, the latter chooses the status that Brian grants her over empathy and racial solidarity when she goes "down, down, down" (138) and goes "straight to Brian" (139). Now that Clare is out of Irene's life, the latter hurries to retrieve her husband, and at the same time, the status that Clare took away from her. Additionally, Irene appears selfish again, as her only preoccupation is the others' perception of herself: she keeps wondering "What would the others think?" (137). The perspective of Clare being alive makes her nauseous (139), not because she fears that Clare may suffer, rather because the idea that Clare may still be able to deprive her of her life terrifies her.

Despite Irene's attempt to recover her life, she is ultimately condemned to failure, as she may be aware that she actually did not murder Clare – she failed to reestablish stability in her life. When she becomes aware of John's absence from the crowd surrounding Clare's body, she is disturbed: "Not that! Oh, not that!" (Larsen, 1929, 141). Irene appears to realize that she may not have pushed Clare, as she thought she did, in order to recover her status and her life, yet John's absence may indicate that he fled because he is the murderer. This realization provokes Irene's fall, as "her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark" (Larsen, 1929, 141). Irene's reaction reminds of one's death.

Like Clare, Irene falls: this parallel reinforces the idea that Clare's death impacts Irene, and serves as her punishment. Whether Clare commits suicide or is murdered, Irene is condemned.

A parallel can be drawn between Irene and Sisyphus. Like Sisyphus, Irene betrayed someone's secret for her own sake. Sisyphus was said to have stolen the gods' secrets, and to have used them to obtain what he wanted. When Aegina, the river god Aesopus's daughter, has been kidnapped, the latter encountered Sisyphus who offered to reveal Aegina's location if Aesopus created an eternal spring for Sisyphus's kingdom – Corinth. The god accepted and Sisyphus revealed that Zeus was his daughter's kidnapper. Zeus, to punish him, sent Thanatos, the god of death, to chase him, yet Sisyphus cheated death by chaining him. Therefore, by depriving humankind of death, Sisyphus defied the natural cycle of life. Sisyphus's trick impacted Ares, the god of war, since wars were meaningless for him, because soldiers never perished. Ares freed Thanatos and brought Sisyphus to the Underworld, yet the latter managed to escape, and was ultimately condemned to roll a rock up a hill in Tartarus, the lowest region of the Underworld reserved for extreme punishments, only to roll it back up for eternity. Sisyphus has been condemned to an eternal cycle of punishment. In Larsen's novella, Irene's repeated ascent and descent of the stairs echo Sisyphus repeated ascent and descent of the hill. She indeed climbs the stairs for the first time with Clare and Brian, then she descents the stairs after Clare's death. Irene perceives the stairs as "endless" (139); the adjective "endless" implies a cycle, the ascent of the stairs never ends, it can refer to a catabasis – which echoes Sisyphus's descent to the Underworld – that suggests her perpetual torment. Even though her second ascent of the stairs is not explicit, it is implied by "the strange man" when he tells Irene: "Let's go up and have another look at that window" (Larsen, 1929, 141). The suggestion for that second ascent establishes a cycle, which echoes Sisyphus's cycle. Although Irene does not carry an actual rock, her metaphorical rock is her failure.

In Larsen's *Passing*, the staircase is a liminal space conducive to transformations and revelation of the true self. In her article "Setting the Stage for Something New Understanding Arts-Based Initiatives through the Lens of Liminality and Rites of Passage," Claudia Schnugg defines a liminal space: "Liminality is linked to the anthropological view of 'rites of passage' (transition rites), which facilitate times of change and mark – or even constitute – transitions" (Schnugg, 77). According to this definition, the staircase serves as a liminal space for both Clare and Irene. As I studied previously, Clare transitions from a passing woman to a Black woman. Yet Irene transitions

from a hypocrite to a condemned woman. During her climb, Irene confirms her decision to deprive Clare of her passing, for "Irene walked beside them on the cleared cement path that split the whiteness of the courtyard garden" (Larsen, 1929, 134). The cleared cement path symbolizes Irene's decision to end Clare's passing, as the path splitting the snow represents the rupture of Clare's passing. The cleared path suggests that Clare will no longer disturb Irene's life, and foreshadows Clare's death because Irene's life will be cleared of Clare.

Moreover, the entrance to Felise's apartment marks their transformation: since Irene is the cause of those transformations, she is also positioned as a guide toward change. She is the one who indicates to Brian and Clare: "It's this entrance, I believe" (Larsen, 1929, 134). Another paradox, which may serve as punishment, is that Irene hates change, yet she is at the origin of change in the novella, and suffers those changes.

Clare is the character who is overtly passing in Larsen's *Passing*, yet Irene is actually the one who is being punished for her internalized whiteness, and her implicit passing, as she now lives with the burden of secrecy. Clare's death is indirectly the result of Irene's secrecy. As I explained in "Secrecy," the latter refuses to warn Clare, and even Brian, that she indirectly revealed Clare's secret to John. Irene is now punished for the rejection of her Blackness. In the novella, Irene indeed repeatedly claims that she protects Clare's secret as a form of race "allegiance" (45); this idea is further reinforced by the use of the nouns "allegiances" (118), and "loyalty (121). However, by betraying Clare, she also betrays her Black race, and sides with white John Bellew. Since Irene protected Clare's secret because they belong to the same race, Irene's decision not to warn Clare that she revealed her secret, symbolizes her severance with the Black race, and marks her allegiance not to the white race – but to herself.

Like Twyla in Morrison's "Recitatif," Irene's perception may be unreliable, as it may be influenced by her jealousy for Clare. Irene's claim to be Black – and to even symbolically embodying the Black race by embodying the committee – is debunked by her internalized whiteness. Yet she does not seem to be aware of her penchant for whiteness.

Irene even unconsciously uses her husband as a pretext for rejecting Clare, as she pretends that Brian is the one who does not want Clare around, whereas Irene is the one who does not. Irene misunderstands her husband and misinterprets his reactions: "'You're not,' he asked, 'going to see

her?' His words, however, were in reality not a question, but, as Irene was aware, an admonition. […] 'Brian darling, I'm really not such an idiot that I don't realize that if a man calls me a nigger, it's his fault the first time, but mine if he has the opportunity to do it again'" (Larsen, 1929, 61). Irene's awareness is unreliable, given the fact that she is unaware of her own internalized whiteness. Her answer aligns with the admonition she perceived in her husband's words, as she expresses her lack of intent on meeting Clare again – and even less her racist husband. Her sarcastic tone implies that she already rejected the idea of seeing Clare again before Brian supposedly suggests her not to. In this regard, her decision to reject Clare comes from her, not from Brian. She may interpret Brian's reaction as a reprimand, for it unconsciously comforts her that Brian's disapproval is the cause for her distance from Clare, and not her internal conflict. Irene experiences double-consciousness – a concept developed by W.E.B Du Bois in his work *The Souls of Black Folk*. He discusses the psychological impact of racial discrimination on African Americans, and their divided sense of identity in a white-dominated society.

Du Bois defines double-consciousness: "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 6). This quote echoes Irene's internal conflict – she is torn between her belonging to the Black community, and her desire for the convenience of whiteness. Her demeanor is paradoxical and reflects the internal conflict she faces. Despite her claim to be a Black woman – and to even embody the Black community when she affirms "I *am* the committee" (80) – Irene paradoxically adopts white reflexes. This creates tension between her self-perception and her attitude. At the beginning of the second chapter of the novella, Irene suffers from the heat during her shopping session in Chicago, and for her own good, she chooses convenience over her race, as she requires the assistance of a taxi driver to take her to a rooftop for tea: "With a quick perception of the need for immediate safety, she lifted a wavering hand in the direction of a cab parked directly in front of her" (Larsen, 1929, 10). By requiring the taxi driver's help, Irene implicitly associates "immediate safety" to whiteness, as he drives her to the exclusively white rooftop of the Drayton.

The idea that Irene fails to grasp the meaning of her husband's question (You're not going to see her?) is confirmed when the latter answers: "My dear, you misunderstand me entirely. I simply meant that I hope you're not going to let her pester you. She will, you know, if you give her

half a chance and she's anything at all like your description of her" (Larsen, 1929, 62). Irene interprets her husband's question conveniently, as she considers that, like her, Brian rejects Clare from their life. The verb "misunderstand," reinforced by the adverb "entirely," indicates Irene's misinterpretation: she understood that Brian was forbidding her to see Clare again, because she expected his question to mean that. The adverb "simply" also suggests that Irene's interpretation may be exaggerated compared to the actual meaning of Brian's question, as he did not necessarily intend to reprimand her, but he was merely asking. Rather, he subtly expresses his skepticism about Irene's potentially excessive description of Clare, as implied by the subordinating conjunction "if" which conveys the hypothetical veracity, or accuracy of Irene's statement about Clare, in the eyes of Brian. Additionally, although the verb "pester" can refer to harassment, here, it is used by Brian in a lighter tone, communicating his perception of Clare's attitude as annoyance, rather than a harmful behavior. Through his suggestion that Clare is not a threat, Brian may implicitly indicate that Irene should accept Clare's offer to see her again.

Furthermore, Irene criticizes Clare's link to the Black race throughout the novella, whereas she is not aware of her own hypocrisy. She indeed claims that "Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it" (Larsen, 1929, 59). Irene appears to be aware of the difference between being involved in the race one was born in, and being condemned by ancestry. Although Irene negatively portrays Clare's ties with the Black race, Irene's own statement can also apply to herself. In one of the questions she asked herself about her first encounter with Bellew, she indeed defines her link to the Black race as belonging: "Why, simply because of Clare Kendry, who had exposed her to such torment, had she failed to take up the defense of the race to which she belonged?" (Larsen, 1929, 58–59). The use of the verb "belonged" instead of the verb "cared" implies that Irene belongs to the Black race for a matter of circumstances – not by choice. She belongs to the Black race as she is from a Black lineage, she grew up in a Black community, and she now lives in Harlem. Those elements tie her to this race, but do not necessarily provide genuine care or pride. Otherwise, she would not pass to access the privileges whiteness grants, and internalize white ideologies. Irene fails to recognize her own hypocrisy, as she blames Clare for the same decisions she takes.

Beyond making the same decisions as Clare, Irene's are even worse. Irene indeed reproaches Clare for "taking a chance, and not at all considering anyone else's feelings" (Larsen,

1929, 48). Yet like Clare, Irene takes her chance, but contrary to her, Irene considers others' feelings. This proves that Irene's selfishness drives her to consciously prioritize her own well-being over others. Irene indeed consciously decides to make the stability in her life a priority over her family's welfare when she disagrees with Brian's idea to move to Brazil. Irene claims:

> "It isn't fair, it isn't fair." After all these years to still blame her like this. Hadn't his success proved that she'd been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York? Couldn't he see, even now, that it had been best? Not for her, oh, no, not for her – she had never really considered herself – but for him and the boys. Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have remain as it was? That strange, and to her fantastic, notion of Brian's going off to Brazil, which though unmentioned, yet lived within him; how it frightened her, and – yes, angered her! (Larsen, 1929, 64–65).

Irene fails to recognize her selfishness. The repetition of "it isn't fair" in direct speech, functions as Irene's attempt to convince herself that her husband's reaction is really inappropriate, and to indirectly convince herself that she rejected his offer solely for him and their sons. The narrator's repetition of "not for her," carries an ironic tone, reinforced by the interjection "oh, no" which adds a dramatic effect, as the narrator perceives Irene's hypocrisy. The stress on the auxiliary "had" with the use of italics, suggests that Irene's decision may have been the best option in the past, but it is no longer the case. The rhetorical questions "Hadn't his success proved that she'd been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York?" and "Couldn't he see, even now, that it *had* been best?" express Irene's perception of Brian's ingratitude for her efforts. The rhetorical question "Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have remain as it was?" conveys Irene's helplessness in the face of her husband's project, and the negative impact on her. Those three questions create pathos, as they portray Brian as ungrateful for Irene's supposed sacrifice, while she is described as a selfless character. However, Irene is worried about her own fate, not about her family's.

Moreover, her husband's perception of his own life does not align with the "success" that Irene describes, since her husband hates his job: "How I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways" (Larsen, 1929, 64). The accumulation creates an endless rhythm which reflects his weariness regarding his job. The intensifier "how" emphasizes the association of the verb "hate" with exclusively negative adjectives; it reinforces his hatred of his job. The verb "insisting" in "she'd been right in insisting that he stick to his profession" positions Irene as a controller, as she imposes her wish on her husband, who is condemned to suffer her choice.

She pretends to reject Brian's idea for her family's sake, yet she is more advantaged by that decision, as she seeks stability and security. As I explained in this thesis, Irene wants to protect the stability in her life, for "Irene didn't like changes, particularly changes that affected the smooth routine of her household" (Larsen, 1929, 66). Brian's project threatens Irene's habits, since the simple idea of moving to Brazil disturbs Irene's tranquility, as shown by the rhetorical question "Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have remain as it was?". The incertitude of her fate, caused by Brian's purpose, deprives her of the perspective of her stable life in Harlem – where she maintains a good status. In his article entitled "A Transnational Novel in Disguise: The Influence of Brazil in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," Grant M. Andersen explores the symbol of Brazil, as a country where racial lines do not exist, and studies Brian's desire to relocate there. Andersen also mentions the threat that Brian's project represents for Irene's security. He identifies what security means to her:

> The structure of Irene's security comes from her social status: a middle-class black woman, the wife of a black doctor, and a model for black racial uplift. However, part of Irene's "security" and social status, as model for black racial uplift, requires her "blackness" in terms of the American color line, something ostensibly absent from Brazil (Andersen, 3-4).

By rejecting Brian's project, Irene is opposed to the reason for his desire to relocate, as he wants to be freed from the racial line imposed by the United States. Irene's security indeed relies on her

ability to be a superior Black woman in Harlem, yet if she moves to Brazil, she loses that status, and her superiority – Irene uses her race as a tool for success. By depriving her husband of that opportunity, Irene also implicitly retains her instrument for security, as Brian assures her superior status through his prestigious career. Beyond the Black race, her light complexion also grants her the ability to pass as white occasionally like she does on the Drayton's roof; that ability contributes to her superiority as a Black woman, for she is a Black woman who can access white privileges. Considering this, Irene seeks the privileges of both the Black and the white races, and that is punished by the author.

Throughout the narrative, Irene indeed progressively loses the status that she wanted to preserve until the end of the narrative. As I mentioned in "Loss," Brian and Clare may have an affair. That affair may have deprived Irene of her Blackness. Therefore, it may also have deprived her of her status, since her Blackness, as Andersen states, is required for her social status as a model for Black "racial uplift." The irony of the situation lies in the fact that Irene prevented Brian from fulfilling his purpose of relocating to Brazil – in order to ensure her position in American society as a Black woman. Yet she still lost her status when Brian chose Clare, and when their sons also chose Clare, and when Clare intruded into her life. The menace that Clare is for Irene allows to venture the hypothesis that Irene murders Clare at the end of the narrative.

c) Varieties of Passing and Varieties of Condemnation

In Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, Adele Vignes condemned her descendants by breaking Mallard's tradition of marrying exclusively Mallard inhabitants. Since Adele's decision disturbed the balance in Mallard, and defied the "natural" order of things in the town, her punishment also consists in disturbing her balance – she is deprived of her pair: "A pair. She was supposed to have a pair" (Bennett, 2020, 39). The verb "supposed" implies that the established norm in her life is to have the twins, yet their separation disturbed the natural balance. The repetition of "a pair"

highlights the object of her punishment. It also adds a dramatic effect, which underscores Adele's helplessness. The reiteration of the structure of those phrases on the next page further reinforces the imbalance in Adele's life: "A pair. Adele used to have a pair" (Bennett, 2020, 40). The modal expression "used to" stresses the loss of balance in her life, as it suggests that that past habit ceased, and is in rupture with her present life. In this novel, the characters are condemned – not necessarily punished – by the lives they initially rejected – Adele is condemned to an unbalanced life, Desiree to a life in Mallard, and Stella to a life of insecurity.

By marrying Leon Vignes, Adele broke the tradition. As a consequence, she no longer aligns with her lineage, and no longer accesses the privileges of the Decuirs who "were used to soft things, to long, easy lives" (Bennett, 2020, 36). Unlike her ancestors, Adele did not live an easy life, because of her husband's death, the departure of the twins, and the imbalance those events created. Her life has also been shortened, as she died quite early because of her disease. Adele is in rupture with the habits of her ancestors, as shown by the association of the verbs "were" and "used" which evokes past habits.

Adele ultimately obtains a second chance, when she has Alzheimer. Her disease could be perceived as a penalty for breaking the traditions, yet it functions as a regain of balance. In her novel, Bennett offers a new perspective on Alzheimer disease (AD), and introduces this disease as a meaningful trope. This disease is usually perceived as loss in literature, as suggested by Tegan Echo Rieske, in his work "Alzheimer's Disease Narratives and the Myth of Human Being." He discusses the Alzheimer disease and its impact on the ill person. He explores the devastating effects of Alzheimer, and the loss of identity provoked by it. The author perceives the disease as destructive: "AD narratives tend to relate a story of senseless deterioration, a story not just of loss, but of pathological loss" (Rieske, 17). The impact of Alzheimer on Adele contrasts with the traditional function of the disease in literature, for it serves as a reenacting of the past and identity, rather than loss of identity in her case.

Due to Alzheimer, Adele is not aware of the loss of her pair, and becomes the mother of a pair again. Her disease allows the reintroduction of Stella in Mallard, and reunites the sisters, since Adele treats Stella like the girl she used to be before leaving Mallard: "'Girl, come help us clean those fishes,' Adele said. 'And go get your sister'" (Bennett, 2020, 335). Because of Alzheimer,

Adele fails to grasp the reason for Stella's presence, she does not realize that Stella was absent and addresses her like she used to address young Mallard Stella. Through the banality of the task that Adele orders Stella to accomplish, Adele unconsciously banalizes and facilitates Stella's return to Mallard, which avoids the confrontation and the tension expected by Stella. By referring to Desiree as Stella's sister, Adele reestablishes the ties that Stella had severed in New Orleans – Adele unconsciously reenacts her past as the mother of twin sisters.

Additionally, Adele's vulnerability initiates the reunion of the twins. When Adele asks either Early or Stella to call Desiree for dinner, Early affirms that "Stella'll fetch her. […] I'm gonna stay right here with you" (337). Through his decision to protect Adele from Stella, Early and Adele indirectly provoke the twins' reunion. In this novel, Alzheimer functions as a way to time travel, for Adele infantilizes her twins, who also act like the teenagers they used to be: "The twins, laughing, talking over each other again, churning their way through that bottle. Desiree, looking out for their mother, the way she'd done when they were teenagers smoking on the porch" (Bennett, 2020, 341–342). The accumulation "laughing, talking over each other again, churning their way through that bottle" creates rhythm, which reflects the euphoria of the twins during that reunion. The intensity of their emotions is reinforced by the verbs "laughing," "talking," and "churning" which express the twins' happiness. Desiree's behavior echoes the same behavior as the one she adopted as a teenager, as implied by the clause "the way she'd done when they were teenagers smoking on the porch," which draws a parallel between present and past – Adele blurs the line between present and past. Therefore, Adele's disease serves the cyclicality theme of the novel, established by the intergenerational encounters, and the cyclical structure of the narrative.

However, her regained balance is temporary, for Stella's second and definitive departure reestablishes unbalance in Adele's life: "There was supposed to be two women comforting her [Jude's] grandmother at the end, one on each side of the bed, one holding each hand" (Bennett, 2020, 359). The verb "supposed" echoes its use in the sentence "She was supposed to have a pair" (39); it draws a parallel between those two sentences, because the noun phrase "the two women" refers to that pair that Adele was deprived of. Jude's perception of her grandmother's last days is misleading, for she expected balance, as suggested by the repetition of the determiner "each" in "one on each side of the bed, one holding each hand."

Moreover, “passing as” consists in blurring and crossing a line, and in a transformation. Considering this, Adele’s disease could be perceived as a form of passing, for it makes her blur the line between past and present, and cross boundaries of time. Adele paves the way for the emergence of a new intergenerational and inevitable way of passing in the novel –time passing. The narrator indicates that Alzheimer is hereditary:

> Alzheimer’s disease was hereditary, which meant that Desiree would always worry about developing it. She would begin filling out crossword puzzles because she’d read in some women’s magazine that brain puzzles could help prevent memory loss.
> “You’ve got to exercise your brain,” she would tell her daughter, “just like any other muscle.”
> Her daughter didn’t have the heart to tell her that the brain was, in fact, not a muscle. She tried her best to help her with the clues while she imagined Stella out in the world somewhere, already forgetting (Bennett, 2020, 358).

The disease is transmitted through generations, as shown by the adjective “hereditary.” Adele appears to be the first character to have Alzheimer in the narrative, in this regard, she is the first Decuir to transmit that disease to her offspring. In alignment with the history of traditions establishment by that family, Adele’s transmission of Alzheimer can be perceived as the establishment of a new tradition, which contrasts with the consequences of the past transgressions. It indeed allows the forgetting of former pains and losses. Nevertheless, Desiree’s reluctance suggests that the next generation does not necessarily want to forget, because forgetting also involves renouncing one’s identity. As Rieske explains in his article, the disease leads to the loss of the self through the loss of memory: “The person has been overtaken by the disease, dislocated by disease; the face of the person is the face of the disease. From this perspective, AD is a private condition, an individual disease” (Rieske, 4). Desiree may fear that, like Rieske claims, she may be reduced to the status of an ill woman, and that the disease creates a rupture with the young Desiree who fled from Mallard. She may fear that she forgets her rejection of Mallard’s ideologies and traditions when she escaped; that decision contributes to her identity. As a woman who desired agency, the perspective of having no control over her own mind and her attitude may terrify her.

Besides the fear of forgetting her loved ones and her identity, it is possible that Desiree fears to forget Stella, whom she will not be able to remember since she will not see her again. Moreover, the narrative has demonstrated that Desiree is not inclined to follow traditions – she rejects them. Nevertheless, that established tradition appears to be inevitable, as suggested by Jude's thought: "her daughter didn't have the heart to tell her that the brain was, in fact, not a muscle." If the brain cannot be trained, the disease cannot be prevented. Moreover, despite Stella's distance, she cannot escape the disease either. While the sentence "you can escape a town, but you cannot escape blood" (7) mostly refers to race heritage, it also applies to Adele's heritage – Stella has succeeded in severing ties with her Black ancestry, yet she cannot sever ties with her whole genetic inheritance.

In Larsen's *Passing,* Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry are passing as straight. Although their homosexuality is never explicitly revealed, some hints can lead to venture that hypothesis. In her chapter entitled "Women of the Harlem Renaissance," Cheryl Wall examines the racial passings in Larsen's *Passing*. She also suggests that Irene and Clare pass as straight:

> According to some critics, Irene desires Clare sexually. An unreliable narrator, Irene does not acknowledge such desires; neither does she disqualify her from judging Clare. Moreover, while Clare's survival depends literally on her ability to keep up appearances – were her racist husband to discover she is not white he would divorce her or worse – it is the same for the other female characters. Each relies on a husband for material possessions, security, and identity. Each reflects and is a reflection of her husband's class status (Wall, 43).

She shares the hypothesis ventured by some critics, that Irene may desire Clare beyond her hatred of her. As passers, they are able to keep a secret and to disguise reality. In this regard, they can easily conceal their homosexuality. Yet some hints imply their mutual desire. Clare is perceived as a mesmerizing woman by Irene, whom she attempts to resist: "There was no mistaking the friendliness of that smile or resisting its charm. Instantly she surrendered to it and smiled, too" (Larsen, 1929, 15). This quote reveals that Irene was receptive to Clare's charm during their encounter on the Drayton's roof. It also reveals that Clare initiates their homosexual relationship by seducing Irene. The adverb "instantly" suggests that Irene's attraction to Clare was immediate.

Moreover, in Clare's eyes, Irene is the only person who can remedy her loneliness: "… For I am lonely, so lonely…cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life…" (Larsen, 1929, 6). This quote is an extract from a letter sent by Clare to Irene. The ellipses show that the letter contains other elements, yet the narrative appears to transcribe Irene's reading of that letter, who seems to unconsciously select the elements which she considers the most important. The elements which stand out in her eyes sound like a love declaration, and seem to express Clare's passion for Irene. According to Clare's words, Irene appears to be essential in her life, and to be her Holy Grail, as Clare claims that she "never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life." That declaration suggests that Irene represents Clare's ultimate desire, and surpasses all Clare's wishes. The verb "longing" emphasizes Clare's passion for Irene.

Furthermore, Irene feels threatened by Gertrude's unexpected presence at Clare's tea party: "And her presence there annoyed Irene, roused in her a defensive and resentful feeling for which she had at the moment no explanation" (Larsen, 1929, 36). Irene's reaction may be perceived as jealousy. Irene feels threatened and irritated by Gertrude's link with Clare, her "defensive and resentful feeling" is justified by Gertrude's presence in Clare's house. As explained above, the house is a symbol of intimacy and privacy. Considering this, Irene may disapprove of the fact that Gertrude accesses Clare's private space. Irene's inexplicable reaction suggests that she is not aware of her desire for Clare, and of that jealousy. In the novella, Irene's rejection of Clare may be the unconscious repression of her unconscious desire for her.

Additionally, Clare's epistolary attempt to reconnect with Irene has a romantic dimension:

> Every day I went to that nasty little post office place. I'm sure they were all beginning to think that I'd been carrying on an illicit love affair and that the man had thrown me over. Every morning the same answer: "Nothing for you." I got into an awful fright, thinking that something might have happened to your letter, or to mine. And half the nights I would lie awake looking out at the watery stars – hopeless things, the stars – worrying and wondering (Larsen, 1929, 75).

The determiner "every" suggests a consistency and a persistence in Clare's action. Her hope for Irene's answer pushes her to face the aversion to go to that "nasty little post office place," and

judgment by people believing in her infidelity. Through Clare's mention of infidelity with a man, Larsen may indicate that it is not their belief in the existence of a love affair that is wrong, but that the love affair is with a man. Since Clare is addressing Irene, the readers may be expected to draw a parallel between the potential love affair and Irene. Clare's disappointment about Irene's lack of answer provokes torment within Clare, and insomnia.

In Morrison's "Recitatif," the protagonists Twyla and Roberta are not condemned for passing, yet they are condemned for internalizing the stereotypes and the social constructs that Morrison is willing to deconstruct within her readers. Although Maggie is the character who is inflicted a physical punishment, she is not the one whom the author wants to punish, as she wants to punish Twyla and Roberta – Maggie is used as a punishment tool. In their article "Sympathy and Indeterminacy in Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif,'" Miehyeon Kim discusses the author's purpose of deconstructing her readers' stereotypes and ideologies through the unreliability of the narrator and the protagonists' memory of race. The author quotes Nietzsche's idea about morality: "We become reflective at all about our actions in the context of justice and punishment and that morality emerges as the terrorized response to punishment and our conscience is constructed by turning our natural aggression toward ourselves" (Kim, 143). According to this idea, Twyla and Roberta become aware of their assault of Maggie because of their internalization of society's constructs, when they are condemned to torment. The violence inflicted to Maggie is symbolically returned to them through the mystery surrounding their actions. The protagonists remain ignorant of what happened to Maggie: "Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?" (Morrison, 1983, 40). Twyla and Roberta are condemned to the torment provoked by their incapacity to remember Maggie's assault. Roberta's cuss words reveal the protagonists' realization of the gravity of their actions. Their debate over Maggie's race results in a gap which cannot be filled. Morrison also appears to appropriate the concept of the "Tragic Mulatto," since Maggie, as a "mulatta," is not destined to a tragic fate because of an internal conflict provoked by the duality of her racial heritage, but because the St. Bonny's children struggle with their own internal conflict.

The three works under study explore different ideas of passing and of its consequences. Yet the three narratives are deceptively structured, because the character subjected to violence, or death, is not necessarily the one who is condemned. Cyclicality is a recurrent pattern in the three works, since the reenactments and the repeated encounters create a sense of inevitability. Bennett

privileges reinvention and renewal over condemnation of the passing practice, while Larsen and Morrison condemn their passing characters. The three authors engage with the emergence of alternative forms of passing beyond classic racial passing. Yet their approach of passing contributes to the reinvention of the tradition of racial passing, as those new forms of passing are shaped by the characters' ability to cross boundaries.

Conclusion

Bennett, Larsen, and Morrison all debunk the idea of race through their respective works which cover three different generations and eras. The three works offer similar portrayals of race – through their respective works, the authors all agree that race is a social construct, and that race is unfixed. The authors demonstrate that passing does not solely involve crossing racial boundaries established by society, but it also involves crossing class boundaries, for the white race grants privileges. Larsen and Bennet also show that passing can take many forms and is not necessarily race-related, as Larsen created characters who pretend to be heterosexual, and act as such to dissimulate their homosexuality. Bennett created characters who crossed the gender boundaries and rejected society's construct of gender. A parallel can be drawn between the two narratives, for both Clare and Barry perform two aspects of their identity – Clare performs both her Black and white identities, and Barry also embodies two aspects of his identity.

Despite Stella Vignes's decision to pass as white and to suppress her Black identity, the latter may still be tied to the African Americans' situation in the United States. Although Stella severs ties with her African American identity, and that the narrative does not portray Stella as an activist, or even as a politically-committed character, her decision to name her daughter Kennedy may be a subtle and implicit political act. The name Kennedy reminds of the Kennedy Brothers – John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. The Kennedy brothers were strong advocates for the Civil Rights and were against segregation. Considering this, Kennedy may embody Stella's sensibility to the fate of her original community.

Brit Bennett's decision not to punish her passing character Stella, may be influenced by her sympathy for Larsen's Clare Kendry. In her introduction to Nella Larsen's *Passing,* Bennett admits that "Clare struck me as beguiling and sympathetic" (Bennett, 2021, xiv). Therefore, Bennett may not perceive passing as an indignation or as a race betrayal, but rather as a journey for survival, like her character Stella who initially started to pass at Maison Blanche to ensure her twin sister's and her own financial security. Yet Stella did not intend to betray her race or her family, she just decided to pass as white permanently because she could access what she has been deprived of as a Black woman and as a twin – a fate on her own and security. Stella's decision fits in Alphonse

Decuir's perception of his "more Perfect Negro," for the latter was convinced that lightness could grant privileges – Stella may have fulfilled his dream. By passing, Stella has rejected the tragedy surrounding "mulattoes," as illustrated by her father's tragic fate; or by Clare's death after reconciling both her white and her Black ancestries while passing as white and reconnecting her Black self; and by Irene who coveted superiority within her Black community while internalizing white values. Although Bennett's decision not to lead Stella to a tragic ending may be influenced by her sympathy for Clare, Stella's fate may not serve as Bennett's reinvention of Larsen's ending, for Clare and Stella took opposite decisions in terms of racial identification.

Larsen may have written Clare's death because the latter has fulfilled her fate by returning to her true self, after realizing that embodying someone else would not provide her with the stability she coveted all her life. In her novella, death functions as a liberation, whether it is suicide or murder– the one who is actually punished is Irene, for she is condemned to live with her internal turmoil. Just as the window symbolizes an access to the world – to freedom – Clare's death provoked by her fall from the window may indicate that she is finally accessing freedom, while Irene experiences a catabasis by descending the stairs. Despite their opposite endings, Bennett's novel, like Larsen's, grants Stella the access to the life she coveted. It does not condemn Stella for surviving in her society, and for provoking the rupture with her imposed status of "mulatta" by challenging, and even rejecting, the society's construct of race, by determining her own identity as a woman with a mixed racial heritage who adopts a white life. However, despite the reinvention of her identity, which opposes the society's criteria, Stella's accomplishment must remain concealed. Like in Larsen's work, Morrison's character of Maggie is not the one who is punished, rather, she serves as a figure provoking thinking. Maggie is dehumanized by her description which highlights parts of her body and her accessories, rather than her body as a whole. Maggie's deconstructed body may echo her function in the short story – her body serves to deconstruct stereotypes. Maggie's muteness contributes to her objectification. Like in Larsen's novella, the character who suffers physical violence is not the one who is punished. The pain inflicted to her actually functions as punishment for those who inflict this pain – those who are tormented by race and status.

Larsen's ambiguous ending, like Morrison's short story, invites her readers to interpret it based on their perception of the practice of passing. Larsen provides a text open to multiple interpretations, in which the readers can side with either Clare or Irene, condemn one or both, or

even remain unsure. The readers have shaped their opinion on this practice, and on the instability of race throughout their reading. Therefore, the ending functions as the revelation of their ideas, as the divergence of interpretations provokes debates.

Larsen's *Passing* was received with mixed reactions among the Harlem Renaissance artists when it was published. Many of them perceived her work as an opposition to the New Negro Movement, and as a challenge to the progress of the Black identity and the Black pride. Yet Larsen's novella *Passing* was also well-received when it was published and is still acclaimed nowadays as shown by W.E.B. Du Bois's 1929 critique: "If the American Negro renaissance gives us many more books like this, with its sincerity, its simplicity and charm, we can soon with equanimity drop the word 'Negro.' Meantime, your job is clear. Buy the book" (Ramon, 15). It is also proved by the 2010 critique by a contemporary author, Heidi Durrow: "There are novels that are enjoyable to read and others that say something about the world. And sometimes there are novels that are both. *Passing* by Nella Larsen is one of those books" (Ramon, 15). The positive reception of Larsen's novella throughout history demonstrates that she portrayed race, and race relations accurately. It suggests that, despite the evolution of American society, Larsen's work is still relevant nowadays, and aligns with the contemporary debates on race.

This work is intergenerational, and despite its fidelity to the 1920s American society, the narrative's stakes and the characters' inner turmoil, driven by their desire to achieve higher social status through racial passing, remain relevant today. Race is indeed as much a social construct as it was in Larsen's era. Yet discussions on race have evolved, now framed within intersectionality, which highlights race as a key factor in shaping social status. Considering this, the three works complete each other. The similarities and the echoes between these works, despite the different publication dates, lead to question the origin of these similitudes: Is it solely the perpetuation of a literary tradition, or will the race debate remain eternal in the United States? I would argue that the literary tradition can be perpetuated, with reinvented tropes, because, despite some shifts in American society, the race debate is timeless.

Morrison's "Recitatif" was well-received when it was published, it was praised for its encouragement for debates among the readership, and for the author's use of paradoxes to purposefully mislead the readers, and make them aware of their stereotypes. The author explored passing from a different angle, and used it as a tool aiming at deconstructing the readers' perception

of race. Her work carries a more explicit political tone than the other two authors, as Larsen and Bennett subtly share political ideas through the setting of their narratives, references to true news topics, or even through the characters' names. The possibility that one of the characters may decide to pass after their stay in St. Bonaventure could have been considered, yet Twyla and Roberta's obsession with race suggests that they are not aware that race is a social construct, they appear to have internalized the stereotypes and the ideas conveyed by society. If one of them had passed, they might have recognized that race is socially constructed rather than fixed by boundaries, as passing debunks the very perception of race in society.

Unlike her predecessor Larsen, Bennett leaves room for the perspective of a successful passing, and for second chances. Stella indeed has the possibility to end her passing twice, when her daughter discovers her true identity, and when she returns to Mallard, yet she decides to sever ties with her Black heritage a second time, and definitively. While the tragic ending in *Passing* aligns with the narrative, which foreshadowed it, Bennett deceives her readers with the ending of *The Vanishing Half*. Stella's attitude and solitude, as well as the risks of being unmasked, prepare the readership for a return to a Black life, yet the prolongation of Stella's passing reminds that Stella's passing is paradoxically her way to independence, and the opportunity for individuality. Those are elements she has been deprived of as the reserved twin sister, and as a Black woman in a white dominated society. In this respect, her twin sister and her life in Mallard may have functioned as a counter-example to the life she wanted to live. By escaping Mallard, Stella escaped poverty, racism, racially-motivated violence, and paradoxically, she escaped duality; as although she deals with two identities by passing as white, she ultimately rejects her Black self when she definitively leaves Mallard. Bennett's novel was acclaimed when it was published in 2020, and even became a bestseller on the *New York Times* fiction list.

My study has focused on female passing. Both Stella Vignes and Clare Kendry live in societies where women are objectified, sexualized and confined to the private sphere. Considering this, the image of the twentieth century-woman may indirectly contribute to the success of their passing performance. Like Clare Kendry, women are usually associated with beauty, and their identity can be limited to their physical appearance. This can be perceived as an advantage, for beauty can mask their identity and charm their audience. Moreover, like Stella Vignes, most of women do not participate in public sphere events – this discretion reduces the risks of being

unmasked. Nevertheless, it would be relevant to compare female racial passing and male racial passing. Male authors of the Harlem Renaissance wrote about passing, like James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* published in 1912. Racial passing is also a subject tackled by contemporary male authors like Philip Roth in his 2000 novel *The Human Stain*. The purpose of that study would be to determine if the strategies employed by male passing characters are the same employed by female passing characters. Unlike women in the twentieth century, men were usually associated with the public sphere, which may complicate their passing performance, as the larger the audience, the riskier the performance becomes. Yet being surrounded by white men in the public sphere may make the imitation process easier, as direct social interaction allows for more nuanced behavioral adaptation; rather than imitating actors on television.

My thesis has demonstrated that passing leads to solitude. The passing characters are burdened with secrecy, which requires the isolation of both the secret, and its owner. Although some characters acknowledge the secret, a secret is not meant to be shared, in order to avoid disclosure. Those other characters who know the content of the secret, such as Kennedy Sanders in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, or Irene Redfield and Gertrude Martin in Larsen's *Passing*, do not endure the constraints of passing. Thus, both Stella Vignes and Clare Kendry must carry the burden alone, unable to share it with anyone who might understand, or relate to their emotional experience. Even though Gertrude Martin also passes as white, she does not pass to her husband, therefore, she cannot grasp Clare's fear of being unmasked by her racist white husband. Similarly, Irene does not deal with the same risks as Clare in her passing experience. However, some cases of passing have revealed that racial passing is not necessarily a lonely path.

Throughout history, though more rarely, some light-skinned African American families have passed as white to access the privileges that whiteness granted. In such cases, the concealment of the secret does not rely solely on one individual, but on several. This shared secret can be perceived as either a benefit or a constraint; the burden of secrecy is shared by people who experience the same difficulties but do not suffer from solitude, yet the secret's owners must tell the same lies, otherwise, any contradictions or inconsistencies in the invented stories could lead to the disclosure of the secret. In history, different cases of family passing existed: some parents concealed their Black heritage from their children and raised them as white children, while some parents involved their children in secrecy, as the children were aware of their Black ancestry.

While Stella Vignes and Clare Kendry sever ties with their Black ancestry in order to pass, some families who passed together did not erase their Black heritage, as they limited it to the private sphere. The concealment of the Black identity, rather than its erasure, can either complicate or facilitate the passing performance, as shifting between the Black self and the white persona can create confusion within the passers, yet the possibility of being one's true self in the private sphere can be relieving. The fact that some families could embrace their Black identity within the confines of their house allowed the perpetuation of the African American culture. Nevertheless, it is possible that some of them internalized white values and severed ties with their Black heritage afterwards. Narratives exploring the stories of families passing as white together have been written; fictional works like Charles W. Chesnutt's 1900 *The House Behind the Cedars*, and nonfictional works like William Lindsay White's 1948 *Lost Boundaries* reflect on the stakes and the complexities of navigating races as a family.

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