Transforming in Plain Sight: Passing and Performance in Passing, Caucasia, and The Vanishing Half

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Citation
Gulien, S. (2022). *Transforming in Plain Sight: Passing and Performance in Passing, Caucasia, and The Vanishing Half.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Transforming in Plain Sight: Passing and Performance in *Passing*, *Caucasia*, and *The Vanishing Half*

MA Thesis
Literature in Society. Europe and Beyond
Leiden University
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June 18, 2022
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Introduction

There are recorded instances of people who have attempted to "pass" throughout American history. Passing can be described as "the movement from one identity group to another, usually from margin to mainstream" (Moriel 167). A person might "pass" when they are in a marginal position in which they experience discrimination due to their gender, race, sexuality or another part of their identity. Consequently, they deliberately move into a mainstream identity category in which they have more rights and privileges. Passing is based on the idea that there are strict boundaries between identity groups. If these boundaries would not be there and identity would be regarded as fluid, passing would not have to exist. Therefore, this thesis recognizes that passing is predicated on a binary view of identity which is not all-encompassing. Yet, passing also challenges the validity of boundaries between identity groups, as it allows people to move between what society often perceives as fixed identities. Furthermore, "passing puts in question judgments based on identity stereotypes that people use to simplify their social environment" (Moriel 167). Thus, passing raises questions on the nature of identity, and whether the characteristics that come with identity categories are innate or performed.

A distinction between two different comprehensions of passing can be made. In the first, most literal and earliest definition, passing is viewed as meaning "to conceal a unitary, essential, and ineffaceable racial identity and substitute it with a purportedly artificial one" (Belluscio 9). This definition can also be applied to other identity categories. As Caughie indicates, this notion of passing involves a degree of fraud since the person that passes masks a part of their "real" identity and substitutes it with a fake identity (20). Thus, this conception of passing regards identity as a fixed thing: "if A is white, A cannot be not white" (Caughie 21). Consequently, this definition indicates that even if you appear white, your essence is still Black. In short, the first definition of passing regards identity as something essential and passing as deceit through which this “real” identity is hidden.

The second, more modern understanding of passing focuses on the performativity of identity, viewing it not as something that is set, but as “a process-oriented performance drawing upon a seemingly infinite number of cultural texts” (Belluscio 9). Therefore, passing is “a performative practice”, since its success relies upon the capability of a person to be viewed as part of a specific identity category and to “perform a certain social role” (Caughie 58). This definition of passing exemplifies that people can have several and fluid identities, and that identity does not adhere to strict binaries. Yet, though seemingly contradictory, the second definition of passing is still connected to the first. Even when viewing identity as fluid, it is important to note that society still assigns people to certain identity categories. Thus, as Pasley and Otto indicate, passing is not solely done by the passer, but also by the dominant group who accept the passer and view them as worthy of the advantages that come with membership in this group (52). This thesis will acknowledge that identity categories are often still viewed as essential in society, while simultaneously exploring the performative nature of passing and identity for the passer.

Though many people have likely hidden parts of themselves throughout history, the recognition of passing as a phenomenon is more recent. Sollors indicates that passing, specifically racial passing, can be viewed as an occurrence “of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century” (247). He argues that the social structures of more recent times allowed for the mobility and anonymity that aid instances of passing, and provided the inequality amid social groups that urge people to pass (Sollors 248). While often connected to race, “‘passing’ has been applied discursively to disguises of other elements of an individual’s presumed ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ identity”, such as gender, sexual orientation and class (Ginsberg 3). As Sollors asserts, passing has historically often arisen from situations in which one social group is regarded as inferior, to gain the basic human rights of other groups (248). However, Ginsberg indicates that passing does not have to be permanent, and might also be driven by other causes or rewards (3). Thus, passing can take different forms and be motivated by distinct aims, but is often compelled by the need to gain a better position in life.

In this thesis, I will explore notions of passing, identity and performance in three American novels: *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen, *Caucasia* (1998) by Danzy Senna and *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett. These novels mainly revolve around racial passing, but also explore other forms of passing: passing in terms of sexuality in *Passing*, class passing in *Caucasia* and transgender "passing" in *The Vanishing Half.* Though research on passing in literature often focuses on racial passing, my thesis will broaden this scope by investigating how other forms of passing differ from and intersect with racial passing. Furthermore, due to the different periods in which the novels are published, a development over time in the portrayal of passing in literature can be seen. I will answer the following research question: How are different forms of passing represented and performed in *Passing*, *Caucasia*, and *The Vanishing Half*? In the first chapter of this thesis, I will outline the history of the concept of passing, different types of passing, and the theoretical framework of this thesis. In the following chapters, I will analyze each novel separately and make a comparison between the novels. These similarities and differences are expressed in the following thesis statement: Whereas *Passing* acknowledges the potential of a performative take on identity but perceives the impossibility of such a way of life in 1920s society, *Caucasia* and *The Vanishing Half* allow their characters more lasting opportunities to deconstruct fixed identity categories and create their preferred identities.

Passing was published and set during the Harlem Renaissance. This period can be defined as "an explosion of creativity and culture within New York City's African American community in the 1920s" (Ritchie 49). The story is told through the perspective of Irene Redfield, who revives a friendship with childhood companion Clare Kendry. Clare has decided to permanently pass as white, whereas Irene only passes for convenience from time to time. Their reconnection sets into motion a chain of events that will tragically end Clare's life, but also brings to the forefront a sexual attraction between the two women. The era during which *Passing* was published makes it an interesting case study for this thesis. Though passing in terms of race and sexuality takes place in *Passing*, the norms and values of the time do not allow any long-term crossing of these bounds, which is exemplified through Clare's death. Therefore, *Passing* allows for a comparison to the later works, in which identity categories are more fluid.

Caucasia follows the lives of biracial sisters Birdie and Cole. Whereas Birdie can present as white, Cole's skin is darker and she is therefore exclusively viewed as Black. Birdie has to convince her fellow students of her Blackness when attending a Black Power School in the 1970s, where her lighter skin makes her an outsider. Furthermore, Birdie has to present herself as white when on the run with her mother from the FBI. Yet, Birdie does not fully relate to either of these identity categories and attempts to forge her own identity that transcends strict racial boundaries. Furthermore, there are several instances of class passing in this novel. Rather than adhering to a strict definition of passing, *Caucasia* portrays the fluidity of identity by exploring the perspective of a biracial girl, who takes on multiple identity categories in terms of race and class.

The Vanishing Half focuses on twin sisters Stella and Desiree, who grow up in a Louisiana town called Mallard. Though they run away from their hometown together, their lives soon start to diverge. Stella takes on a white identity and marries a white man, whereas Desiree returns to Mallard with her dark-skinned daughter. This daughter, Jude, meets a transgender man called Reese, who has shed part of his former identity to take on a male identity. Yet, a transgender person generally "views themselves in terms of their expressed gender" rather than "the sex they were assigned at birth" (Morgenroth and Ryan 3). Transgender "passing" can therefore be regarded as a form of "self-actualization and psychic realness" (Billard 467). Thus, *The Vanishing Half* includes elements of racial passing and transgender identity, bringing with it questions about the nature of identity.

In this thesis, I will introduce several theories of passing, identity and performance. To begin with, W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1903 work on double consciousness can be regarded as a precursor to the other theories in this thesis. Du Bois indicates that African Americans are forced to view themselves through the eyes of white Americans, having a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois). Furthermore, Richard Schechner’s performance theory indicates that performance is a very broad phenomenon that also takes place in daily life, for instance through the “enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles” (2). Similarly, Judith Butler argues that gender is a fabricated act, and defines it as “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 33). Thus, Butler views gender as a performance influenced by society, rather than an essential part of one’s identity. Lastly, Ian F. Haney López investigates the social construction of race, arguing that while race cannot be distinguished biologically, physical characteristics are connected to personal features and race is socially constructed (López 193). The fact that society still assigns certain characteristics to race therefore explains the need for racial passing. These theories all emphasize that identities are influenced by unwritten rules and characteristics assigned to gender, race, class and other identity categories. Therefore, the boundaries between what is an essential part of one’s self and what is a performance dictated by society are often blurred, which is exemplified through the concept of passing.

Chapter 1. Passing and Performance: A Historical and Theoretical overview

In this chapter, I will explore the history of passing in the United States, the distinction between different types of passing, and the theoretical framework of this thesis. Though the first instances of passing are hard to pinpoint, Sollors indicates that the concept of passing first appeared in writing in “notices concerning runaway slaves” (255). In these bills, passing referred to passing as “free”, which later became a synonym for passing in racial terms and “crossing the color line” (Sollors 255). In the eighteenth century, “complexion could be interpreted as a sign of health, behavior, or emotions,” and “did not yet hold a predominant racial meaning” (Block 3). Yet, the antebellum period resulted in the “consolidation of a racialized slave society” which increased the focus on distinctions between races (Hobbs 25). After the Civil War, a period of Reconstruction began which led to a more optimistic mood that “offered political, economic and social logic to the decision *not to pass*” (Hobbs 26). However, Hobbs indicates that when this period resulted in the hardships of the Jim Crow laws, instances of passing became more common again (26). The Jim Crow laws were in place between 1881 and 1964 in 26 states, creating “*de jure* segregation or the legal separation by race of Americans” (Tischauser xi). As Hobbs outlines, the Jim Crow period allowed for “social and physical mobility”, but also resulted in “cramped, segregated living and working arrangements” (26). As a result, Hobbs argues that these conditions together allowed for the essential circumstances for passing to develop (26).

The many cultural expressions of the Harlem Renaissance coupled with an increased focus on racial boundaries led to “a veritable explosion of literature on passing” (Hobbs 26). A case from this time that explores the significance of racial boundaries is the Rhinelander case. This divorce case centers around Leonard Kip Rhinelander, “a white New Yorker from a wealthy family”, who secretly married a mixed-race girl called Alice Jones (Womack 3). Rhinelander’s family did not agree with this marriage, and directed Rhinelander to annul it by virtue of him not knowing that “his wife was a “mulatto’” (Womack 3). However, it was demonstrated that he did and Alice won the case (Womack 3). The importance attached to this case at the time illustrates the “fears over racial mobility in terms of both sex and social class” (Gillespie 281). The case also exemplifies that the idea that races can be divided into binary groups was still widespread in American society.

After World War II, reports on the end of passing started to appear in the media, which critics connected to “the launch of the civil rights movement” and “promises to deliver economic prosperity … to whites and blacks alike” (Hobbs 26). Though Black people in the United States had more opportunities than before, racism did not end and the phenomenon of racial passing “continues well after the US Supreme Court declared the legal apparatus of segregation unconstitutional” (Hobbs 45). During the twentieth century, the one-drop rule was embedded in US law, which indicates that “individuals are classified as black if they possess one black ancestor” (Smith 44). Related to the one-drop rule is the hypo-descent rule, which “assigned people of mixed racial origin to the status of the subordinated racial group”, and is “acknowledged historically by the US census bureau and other agencies of the state” (Smith 44). Thus, the state categorized people as Black based on their family history, even if they might not identify as Black themselves. As a result, mixed-race people experienced the discrimination that came with being Black in the United States, but were simultaneously more easily able to pass and access the privileges of whiteness.

In literature, explorations of racial passing often centered around the figure of the tragic mulatto. As Sollors mentions, the word mulatto refers to a person who has white and Black ancestry (127). The figure of the “tragic mulatto” indicates “those mixed-race literary characters who share a common set of characteristics, including their role in standard narrative lines and plot points” (Clark 260). Generally, tragic mulatto figures were female, and their stories almost always contained the themes of “sex, love and marriage”: they would, for instance, fall in love with a white man who did not know of their heritage (Clark 260). The mixed-race background of the tragic mulatto figure often did not allow them to fit in with the Black or white communities. As Mills outlines, “this racial duality led them to lives of constant sorrow, distress, and resignation that often ended in death or suicide" (413). Thus, the trope of the tragic mulatto connects adversities and misfortunes to a person of mixed-race ancestry.

More recently, the racially focused definition of passing has been applied to other identity categories. In this thesis, I will focus on instances of passing in terms of sexuality, gender performance and class. Though these forms of passing share similarities with racial passing, it is relevant to define them further in order to distinguish between different types of passing. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the definition of what passing entails can depend for different people and in different situations. Some might see class mobility as a form of class passing, whereas for others this is simply a change in financial means. Additionally, a person who identifies as a woman despite having male sexual characteristics might be regarded as passing by some, and as truthfully expressing their identity by others. Furthermore, the way passing is perceived in society has changed throughout time, with a more recent focus on the performativity of identity. Consequently, what was viewed as passing a century ago might not be seen as passing currently.

To begin with, passing in terms of sexuality pertains to "the self-protective disguise of identity practiced by lesbians and gays in a society presumed and enjoined to be universally heterosexual" (Blackmer 55). Since society automatically views people as heterosexual, those who do not fit into this identity category often pass as straight, intentionally or unintentionally. This type of passing differs from racial passing since "the dominant social order often implores gay people to stay in the closet (to pass), while subjects who pass for white are encouraged to 'come out' or reveal themselves as authentically racial subjects" (Schlossberg 6). However, more recently queer people are also "placed under pressure" to come out, or are '"outed' by others" (Reeders 111). Additionally, not all Black people are able to pass due to their physical characteristics, whereas homosexual people might pass more easily if they do not adhere to traits stereotypically connected to homosexuality. Furthermore, Schlossberg indicates that when one passes for white, this generally involves withdrawing from one’s community, whereas passing for straight often takes place to maintain familial or community bonds (6). Also, since straightness is often assumed passing as straight does not always involve an active choice, whereas racial passing can demand more effort.

Secondly, passing can take place in terms of gender performance. Historically, this type of passing has often been focused on women who “adopted masculine personas in historical periods in which women had few rights and little mobility” (O’Brien 627). These instances of passing can be regarded as forerunners of transgender identifications (O’Brien 627). According to Billard, a transgender person “passes” as cisgender “when they show no clear signs of the gender they were assigned at birth” (464). Billard further indicates that within the transgender community, there is an ongoing discussion on whether “passing” as cisgender should be viewed as preferable to portraying an openly transgender identity (467). On the one hand, it can be regarded as a road to “self-actualization and psychic realness” (Billard 467). Therefore, only through “passing” might a transgender person feel like they can be their true self. This aspect of transgender “passing” differs from racial passing, where passing is not necessarily viewed as a form of self-fulfillment. Yet, transgender “passing” is also criticized as it solely focuses on “cisgender aesthetic achievement as a marker of successful gender” (Billard 468). According to Billard, this can portray transgender people who do not “pass” as less legitimate (468). There is one main similarity between racial passing, passing in terms of sexuality and transgender “passing”: these are all identity categories that have been regarded as inferior throughout history, and passing in these cases is often aimed to gain or maintain the rights of the dominant white, cisgender or heterosexual groups.

I will explore a third form of passing in this thesis: class passing. A class passer can be defined as a person who “enacts a ‘false’ and deliberate class performance designed to both conceal his or her class origins, and achieve self-invention by creating and maintaining a new class identity” (Rolens 8). As Williams outlines, class passing exemplifies how class is both structural and performative: in a structural sense, class is decided by social systems, wealth differences, exclusion and admission (139). Class is also continuously enacted physically and through language (Williams 139). Similar to racial passing, instances of class passing often involve a withdrawal from a person's family, since class is generally connected to the family or community a person is from. However, racial passing "remains limited to a numerically small portion of individuals" who have features that can be regarded as white, whereas class passing does not depend on the body as much (Williams 142). It can be argued that class passing is "not often noticed or examined" and regarded as normal conduct in the United States (Foster 102). The US is often viewed as a society in which class does not play a major role, expressed through the concept of American exceptionalism. This concept includes ideas on the "relative weakness of class consciousness" and "the felt fluidity of class boundaries" in the US (Brint and Karabel 725). Class passing might even be admired, for instance in public figures who grow up poor but become wealthy and famous (Williams 141). Yet, As Williams indicates, the existence of class passing exemplifies the social conflict that requires it (141). Achieving the American dream is often regarded as a marker of success, and class passing might be invited by the need to achieve this dream, for instance as expressed in *The Great Gatsby.*

Furthermore, the experience of passing can be intersectional. Intersectionality means that "social identities which serve as organizing features of social relations, mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another" (Shields 302). Thus, a person might pass due to their membership in several intersecting identity groups resulting in a specific kind of inequality. As Schlossberg outlines, passing in terms of race and gender "often coincide in African American literature" (2). This is exemplified in narratives about "escaped 'tragic mulatto' slaves" who camouflage themselves by passing racially and dressing as the other sex (Schlossberg 2). Racial passing can also be tied to class passing in certain situations. After emancipation in the United States, "economic opportunities, as well as political and social access, remained relatively closed to nonwhite Americans" (Williams 137). As a result, racial passing can allow the passer to access opportunities that only white people can normally access, involving a sense of class passing too. In short, an act of passing can intentionally or unintentionally combine passing within various categories of identity, affecting the opportunities and privileges a passer can access.

The first and earliest theoretical concept that I will utilize in this thesis is the idea of double consciousness, which was introduced by Du Bois in 1897. According to Du Bois, double consciousness is the feeling experienced by African Americans of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" which results in a sense of "two-ness" (Du Bois). Thus, Du Bois indicates that African Americans are required to view themselves through the eyes of white and often prejudiced Americans, which influences how they perform their Black identity. As Du Bois indicates: "He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of self-development" (Du Bois). Du Bois explores the fact that African American people have their own history and distinctive identity, while living in a nation that idealizes whiteness and does not allow African Americans as many opportunities as white citizens. Though the double consciousness theory is not intersectional, researchers used it as a basis to explore the intersection of multiple identity categories, for instance through Welang's triple consciousness theory which includes a gendered dimension. Furthermore, it can be viewed as a precursor for the other theories in my thesis and is relevant to apply to the three novels.

A theory that has a similar focus on race is López's 1994 work on the social construction of race. López argues that race greatly affects our lives, behavior, economic future and political situation, indicating that "human fate still rides upon ancestry and appearance" (192). Despite this important role of race in everyday life, López asserts that "few people seem to know what race is" (193). He argues that racial distinctions are not based on dissimilarities in genetics, but are socially constructed (López 194). López defines race as a "sui generis social phenomenon in which contested systems of meaning serve as the connections between physical features, faces and personal characteristics" (193). Accordingly, race is "fabricated" as it is created in relation to other races by humans, is a vital component of social relations, and has meanings that can swiftly change (López 196). The differentiation made between races based on physical characteristics, behavior or ancestry affects the privileges people have, as it often subordinates non-white people. When a person passes, they highlight the social construction of race: simply by presenting their race differently, or by being perceived as part of a different race by society, they can have access to more opportunities in life.

Thirdly, Schechner's performance theory argues that "any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed" can be regarded as a performance (2). Consequently, performance takes place in "everyday life", for instance through the enactment of "professional roles, gender and race roles" (42). Schechner asserts that all performances are "restored behaviors", which he defines as "performed actions that people train for and rehearse" (Schechner 28). Therefore, he argues that people behave how they are taught to behave, and repeat behavior that they have seen around them (Schechner 35). Additionally, social categories such as race and gender can be regarded as "performative", which means that "these consist not of naturally determined operations but of something built and enforced by means of 'performance'" (Schechner 151). Specific actions, behaviors or ways of speaking can be connected to a certain identity category, and a person who belongs to this category can "perform" these actions consciously or unconsciously. Similarly, when a person passes, they act out the characteristics of an identity category, while being dependent on the audience's response for the approval of their performance.

Lastly, Butler's 1990 conception of gender performativity can be associated to Schechner's performance theory. Butler regards gender as something that is invented by society rather than an essential part of one's identity (Butler 33). Thus, as Schechner indicates, Butler argues that "one's biological sex ('female' or 'male') is raw material shaped through practice into the socially constructed performance that is gender" (151). Butler distinguishes between sex and gender, indicating that the division between sex and gender implies a disconnection between "sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders" (Butler 6). Consequently, gender cannot be connected to the body but is continuously performed as a result of gender norms in society. Furthermore, gender is performative: “It creates the idea of gender itself, as well as the illusion of two natural, essential sexes” (Morgenroth and Ryan 1). Therefore, as Morgenroth and Ryan outline, people *are* not women and men, but *act* like them, which in turn conceives the distinction between women and men (1). Additionally, Butler argues that the strict division between masculine and feminine in gender performance is cultivated through the standards of “heterosexual desire” in a society in which heterosexuality is mandatory and normalized (22). In short, Butler views gender as socially constructed, and continuously reinforced through gendered performances which are maintained by the structures of compulsory heterosexuality. Accordingly, the act of transgender “passing” portrays Butlers’ division between sex and gender: transgender individuals do not perform as their biological sex and thereby disrupt the “presumed link between sex and gender” (Morgenroth and Ryan 3).

The concepts of passing, identity, performance, and performativity are all relevant to the literature that this thesis considers. The following chapters will include a close reading of instances of passing in *Passing*, *Caucasia* and *The Vanishing Half* with this theoretical framework in mind.

Chapter 2. A Performative Take on Identity in 1920s Society in *Passing*

In this chapter, I will focus on passing in terms of race and sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, and investigate the significance of the novel's time period for its conceptualization of passing and identity. The novel was published in 1929, when passing "captured the American public imagination" and boundaries between races "were fixed more sharply than ever" (Gillespie 281). It was received positively, with Nella Larsen receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship as the "first black female creative writer" for her writing (Gillespie 280). As Gillespie indicates, initial reviewers mainly empathized with the character of Irene, and "reserve unmitigated disapprobation for Clare", defining the characters as binary opposites (283). In this chapter, I will argue that the novel is ahead of its time in allowing Clare chances to move between identity categories in the novel, and criticizes a racially divided society in doing so. Yet, American society of the 1920s does not permit boundaries between identity categories to be violated, which is exemplified through Clare's death.

Passing centers around Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, both light-skinned Black women. Though friends in childhood, they have not seen each other for twelve years until they reconnect in a luxurious hotel in Chicago called the Drayton. Both women are passing in racial terms during this occasion, but the extent of and reasoning behind their passing differs. To begin with, "Irene identifies with blacks, choosing to 'pass' only for occasional convenience" (Wall 105). This is exemplified at the beginning of the novel, when she is close to fainting on the street and hails a cab out "of the need for immediate safety" (*Passing* 10). When she tells the driver she is looking for a rooftop to drink some tea, he assumes her to be white and suggests the Drayton, a space normally only reserved for white people. This scene portrays the importance of a person's environment in their act of passing: Irene does not consciously decide to pass, but it happens *to* her. She goes along with the assumption of whiteness that the cab driver makes about her, which makes her act of passing very passive. Furthermore, Irene has doubts about passing as she feels fearful of the humiliation that comes with being discovered as a racial passer. She ponders "it wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her" (15). Thus, Irene feels that passing is risky, wondering what "one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes" (24). Irene knows that the one-drop rule classifies her as Black and that passing would be unsafe, therefore only passing when it is absolutely necessary. Yet, she is simultaneously intrigued by the idea of passing, and indicates that it awakens both feelings of contempt and admiration in her (*Passing* 63). In conclusion, despite her mixed feelings about passing, Irene passes sometimes out of practical and safety concerns.

Clare, on the other hand, "has moved completely into the white world" (Wall 105). She has married a white man who does not know about her Black heritage, and has lost most ties to the Black community she grew up in. When Clare talks to Irene at the Drayton, Irene believes Clare is white and fears being recognized as Black by her. She asks herself: "What white girls had she known well enough to have been familiarly addressed as 'Rene by them? The woman before her didn't fit her memory of any of them. Who was she?" (15). After she hears Clare laugh, she realizes that she knows Clare from childhood. Following this realization, she starts to assign Black characteristics to Clare, for instance by describing her eyes to be "Negro eyes" (30). Thus, Clare's presence "refuses easy racial categorization" and exemplifies "that race itself is unknowable, mysterious, and even unstable" (Cutter 93). Clare's race cannot always be known by looking at her, but different characteristics are assigned to her depending on which racial group she is understood to be part of. This exemplifies López's ideas on the social construction of race, since Clare's opportunities in life can change depending on the race she is perceived as. In short, Clare's racially ambiguous appearance allows her to convincingly take on a white identity.

Clare seems to relish in the performance of passing, taking pleasure in having an audience who might find out about her past. When considering Clare, Irene ponders that "through her perplexity there came the thought that the trick which her memory had played her was for some reason more gratifying than disappointing to her old acquaintance" (16). Thus, Clare seems to regard the risk of exposing her Black heritage as a game. As Bennett argues, Clare seems to view passing as a performance, and is attracted to "the possibility that the audience may peak behind the curtain" (*Passing* xv). This is also demonstrated through Schechner's performance theory, as Clare's enactment of whiteness can be viewed as a performance dependent on an audience's approval. Irene recognizes that Clare is performing, as she feels suspicious after receiving a letter from Clare that "Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps –that is, not too consciously–, but, nonetheless, acting" (58). In short, Clare's character exemplifies that race often involves a successful act rather than being an essential element of one's identity.

Furthermore, Clare's reasoning for passing is distinct from Irene's. After her father passed away Clare lived with her white aunts. These aunts "echoed nineteenth-century paternalistic pro-slavery arguments by pronouncing the curse of Ham upon Clare, assigning her a subservient position in the family, and intimating a moral degradation that only hard work and 'white' guidance can correct" (Sullivan 375). Thus, due to her Black heritage Clare was treated as a lesser human being. She aimed to create a better living situation for herself, "to be a person and not a charity or a problem" (27). As Sullivan indicates, "the aunts' definition of blackness attempts to rob Clare of her humanity, so she must shed that black identity to be human" (375). Du Bois' theory of double consciousness is at play here, since Clare is forced to view herself through the eyes of white Americans, recognizing that whiteness will bring her more advantages in life. Additionally, Clare tells Irene that "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" (27). Consequently, for Clare passing as white functions as a way to access the advantages she sees the Black middle-class community have, but that she cannot have herself due to her position as a lower-class Black girl with white caretakers. Irene, on the other hand, is already part of this Black middle-class, and marrying a doctor consolidated her "economic security and secure social standing"

(Youman 237). As a result, Irene's secure status in life does not directly motivate her to pass, whereas Clare's passing is also driven by a hope for class mobility.

The second scene in which passing plays a role is when Clare has convinced Irene to visit her for tea. Gertrude is also present, a school friend who "too had married a white man, though it couldn't be truthfully said she was 'passing'" (*Passing* 35). Gertrude's husband knows about her racial identity, whereas Clare's husband does not. Irene feels uncomfortable during this meeting, which she later realizes is due to "a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind" (36). Thus, she feels unnerved when people move outside identity groups that she views them to be part of. Gertrude and Clare also talk about the fears they had of their children being born with darker skin color. Clare indicates "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark" (38) and Gertrude adds to this "of course, nobody wants a dark child" though her husband "didn't care what color it turned out" (39). While Clare's Black heritage might be discovered if her child is born with darker skin, Gertrude's husband is aware of her heritage but she still wants her children to be born as white as possible. The negative connotations these women attribute to darker children express their "deification of whiteness as a place of 'purity and safety', along with a concomitant demonization of blackness as danger and punishment" (Van Thompson 93). In this instance, the notion of double consciousness can be viewed. In a country in which whiteness is often regarded as superior, both women have internalized negative perceptions toward darker skin. The one-drop rule classifies them as Black and this might be revealed through their children's skin color. Thus, the performance of their white identity might, in the eyes of society, be easily revealed as fake, which exemplifies the complexity and vulnerability of identity categories.

During the meeting, Clare's husband John Bellew enters the room and greets Clare with "Hello, Nig" (42), referring to his belief that she is "'gettin' darker and darker" (42), but that she can "get as black" as she pleases, because he knows Clare is "no nigger" (43). Thus, for Bellew Clare is allowed to have Black features, and this might be part of what attracts him to her and causes him to call her “Nig”. Yet, Clare is not allowed to *be* Black. As Chinn indicates, Bellew knows that a person can have “a dark complexion” without being Black, but once someone has Black heritage, he reverts to the one-drop rule: to him, “blackness is singular, impermeable, the point of no return” (63). After this meeting, Irene is angry at herself for not speaking up against Bellew’s racism. She wonders: “Why hadn’t she spoken that day? Why, in the face of Bellew’s ignorant hate and aversion, had she concealed her own origin?” (58). Irene soon realizes the reason for this: “She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever” (59). Hence, Irene feels connected to her race and loyal to those with a similar racial identity, viewing identity categories such as race as fixed and important. Additionally, Irene recognizes herself in Clare as both women can present themselves as Black and white, while still classifying Clare as Black and therefore worthy of protection.

Furthermore, the novel highlights Irene’s wish for permanence and stability, as Irene indicates that “security was the most important and desired thing in life” (132). Clare’s passing, on the other hand, portrays an “*in*stability, or transient nature” (Toth 60). Though dividing people within set identity categories is often viewed as important in society, Clare moves between these categories. Clare’s acts of passing exemplify that “these categories of being are insufficient, impractical, illusionary” (Toth 56). Hence, Clare’s racial identifications are fluid and she recognizes how identities are performed. Contrarily, Irene appreciates the feeling of stability that comes with neatly fitting into an identity category and wants Clare to fit in one racial group too. Moreover, Irene seems to be unable to grasp the essence of who Clare is. When thinking about Clare, Irene ponders that “no matter how often she came among them, she still remained someone apart, a little mysterious and strange, someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity” (95). As McIntire indicates, Clare is “too *in between, too liminal*” and always “*both* black and white, straight and queer, cold and passionate” (783). Clare’s name, which indicates “clearness, light, and whiteness” (Harrison-Kahan 109) is ironic here, as Irene never gets clarity about who Clare really is. In short, Clare is mysterious and ungraspable to Irene as she crosses boundaries between identity categories but is never fully defined by one.

Besides racial passing, the novel *Passing* also includes elements of passing in terms of sexuality. The narrative begins with a letter sent to Irene by Clare, which includes the following phrases: “For I am lonely, so lonely … cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before” (6). Irene’s reaction to this letter is physical, as “brilliant red patches flamed in Irene Redfield’s warm olive cheeks” (6), and she later describes the letter as “appealing” (71). Clare’s letter and Irene’s response to it seem to indicate the attraction both women have for each other. The start of the novel does not address race yet, and at first sight “Clare’s letter appears to be about jilted love” (Harrison-Kahan 114). Only after the scene at the Drayton does the racial element of the novel become apparent. When Irene first sees Clare at the Drayton, she describes her as “an attractive-looking woman” with “dark, almost black, eyes and that white mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin” (12). Irene is fascinated by Clare’s looks and the way Clare looks at her, expressing a wish to see her again: “Standing there under the appeal, the caress, of her eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn’t be the last” (30). Throughout the novel, Irene describes Clare’s voice as “seductive” (34), and experiences an “inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” when Clare suddenly appears at her house and kisses her hair (75). Thus, Irene defines Clare in terms that are “exotic, sensual, couched in the discourse of desire” (Blackmore 476). As a result, it can be argued that there are sexual undertones to the way in which Irene describes Clare, and that Irene experiences a sexual attraction to Clare.

Coupled with this attraction Irene also experiences a repulsion toward Clare, similar to her feelings about Clare’s acts of racial passing. Irene feels that Clare is daring and risk-taking, “stepping always on the edge of danger” (4). Furthermore, Irene indicates that “the trouble with Clare was, not only that she wanted to have her cake and eat it, too, but that she wanted to nibble at the cake of other folk as well” (58). In this passage, Irene disapproves of Clare and views her as troublesome.

When Clare unexpectedly arrives at her house, Irene tells Zulena “I can’t- No, I’ll see her. Please bring her up here” (74). Thus, Irene first tries to “repress, or bury, her interest by refusing to see Clare”, but later asks for Clare to be brought to her (Harrison-Kahan 116). This change of mind indicates the conflicting feelings that Irene has towards Clare. In the conversation that follows, Irene attempts to end all contact with Clare, asserting that passing as white while simultaneously being in contact with Black people is “not safe at all” (77). However, as Blackmore argues, it is not only Clare’s racial passing that is unsafe, but also Irene’s attraction to Clare. Thus, Irene’s focus on race allows her to “address the issue of her own unnameable desire without exposing herself” (Blackmore 476). Irene therefore uses the topic of racial passing as a way to camouflage expressing her attraction to Clare. Additionally, Irene describes Clare as a “creature utterly strange and apart” (43) and indicates that she has a “strange and compelling” fascination for Clare (29), while also defining her as “selfish, willful and disturbing” (85). These terms express the simultaneous attraction and repulsion that Irene feels towards Clare, as she knows that Clare might bring her trouble but is not fully willing to end their connection.

Furthermore, Irene connects Clare with ideas of sexual experience, as she starts to become convinced that Clare is having an affair with Brian. Similarly, when Irene first sees Clare at the Drayton, Clare is talking to a man who is not her husband, implying she might have an extramarital affair. Butler argues that Clare represents to Irene “a certain kind of sexual daring”, which consists of racial passing but also of adultery, and “alternately entrances Irene and fuels her moral condemnation of Clare with renewed ferocity” (124). Furthermore, Clare compares her correspondence to Irene with a love affair, indicating “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” (75). Thus, Clare does not seem afraid to play with notions of love and sexuality, which implies that she crosses societal boundaries in terms of sexuality, thereby questioning the fixity of these bounds. Yet, she is still in a marriage with a man and is viewed as heterosexual by her environment.

Irene, on the other hand, is very rigid about sex. In a conversation with Brian, she indicates that she is “terribly afraid” her son has “picked up some queer ideas about things”, implying that she does not want her children to know about sex (67). Irene can see in Clare the freedom that she does not allow herself to experience in life, which is part of what both attracts and repulses her from Clare. Yet, the rigid categories of classification that she adheres to in life prevent her from fully recognizing her sexual attraction to Clare. Irene can be defined as an unreliable narrator, since “she has an uncanny ability to repress anything that may threaten that security” (Wagner 145). This affects how she views the world and the decisions she makes. Irene knows that acting upon her attraction to Clare will jeopardize her middle-class life and marriage, and oppose the stability that she values in her life. Irene therefore passes as heterosexual to retain her secure standing and adhere to the patriarchal society around her. Clare does not seem to mind moving between categories of sexuality, but still passes as heterosexual through her marriage to a man.

As explored in the introduction, there are two different understandings of passing. The first and traditional conception of passing views identity categories as fixed, and regards passing as involving a sense of fraud. The second, more modern definition of passing views identity as fluid, and recognizes that passing depends on the extent to which a person can “perform” their membership to an identity category. In *Passing*, Irene seems to adhere to the traditional definition of passing, though the novel as a whole does not support this vision. Irene appreciates having a stable and secure life, identifies with the Black community and feels uncomfortable with Clare’s state “in between” identity categories. Irene still passes for convenience sometimes and is intrigued by the idea of passing, but views it as a last resort instead of a way of life. Additionally, she is attracted to Clare’s sense of sexual freedom and playfulness, but does not allow these characteristics in her own life.

Therefore, Irene experiences both an interest in and a repulsion towards Clare and her acts of passing.

The novel acknowledges a more modern understanding of identity and passing through Clare. She occupies a more fluid, transitory position, blurring the boundaries between identity categories: she is neither fully Black nor white, gay nor straight. Thus, her acts of passing exemplify that people often cannot be defined by rigid identity categories, and that there is a fluidity and performativity to identity. Society at the time, however, did not leave much space for fluid identifications, as it was "structured on strict racial, class, and gender hierarchies" (Van Thompson 101). As Blackmore outlines, though the Harlem renaissance allowed more people to "experiment more or less openly with homosexuality and bisexuality", this was not regarded as a proper way of life, as many lives at the time were still defined by the patriarchy and strict social hierarchies (480). As a result, Larsen is ahead of her time in recognizing that identity groups can be socially constructed, and that identities are often in flux. Larsen criticizes the fixity of identity categories and with it the traditional definition of passing by portraying passing as essential to survive. As McIntire indicates, "every character in the book, we realize, is infected by the pathologies of a society that insists difference demands fear, fear requires lying, and that passing for what one is not is safer than telling the complicated versions of truth available in a racially stratified society" (790). Thus, Larsen condemns the racist society of the time, and is therefore more progressive than the characters she writes about. Yet, despite Larsen's critique, the United States of the 1920s still adheres to a traditional definition of passing, viewing it as fraudulent and dangerous.

With these differences in mind, the ambiguous ending of the novel is relevant to explore. During a party at Felise's house, John Bellew storms into the room, making clear his discovery of Clare's racial heritage by shouting to her "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" (136). Thus, Bellew's pet name "Nig" has changed into "nigger", and gone from affection to hate with the addition of a few letters. Clare does not respond as one might expect, as she "seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring”, with a “faint smile on her full red lips” (137). Irene then lays her hand on Clare’s arm, and a moment later Clare has disappeared out of the window: “One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (137). It is never explicitly stated what causes Clare’s death, and scholars have varying opinions on whether Irene or Bellew might have pushed Clare, she fell or fainted, or jumped out of the window. Though the tragic death of Clare fits with the literary convention of the tragic mulatto, Clare herself does not fully adhere to this convention. As Tate outlines, tragic mulatto characters generally feel anxious about leaving their Black identity behind, whereas Clare remains “inscrutable” (597). Furthermore, Clare seeks Irene’s friendship for “excitement”, rather than “racial pride and solidarity” (Tate 597).

While Clare’s narrative allows her opportunities to create and perform her own identity and move between different identity categories, it turns out that these chances cannot last. Clare’s death, therefore, can be regarded as a punishment for her undermining of the borders between identity groups and her failure to adhere to societal norms. As Harrison-Kahan indicates, “the passing subject ceases to exist when the performance is disabled” (136). Clare’s performance is unmasked by her husband, who represents the white, prejudiced society, and as a result Clare cannot live anymore, as she is too much “in between” to be accepted. Only the fixed perceptions of racial identity by Irene and Bellew are allowed to exist. Hence, Larsen acknowledges the potential of a more performative take on identity through the character of Clare, and criticizes the racially separate society of the time in doing so. Yet, she also perceives the impossibility of a performative vision of identity in 1920s American society. Therefore, Clare’s movement between different identity groups cannot subsist in this society, which is exemplified through her death.

Chapter 3. Deconstructing Race in *Caucasia*

In this chapter, I will explore instances of racial and class “passing” in *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna. I will argue that *Caucasia* portrays a deconstruction of fixed identity categories since Birdie performs both Blackness and whiteness, but also different gradations within these identity groups. The end of the novel allows her to create her own Black and mixed identity without having to adhere to outside expectations, while remaining aware that society might expect a certain racial performance from her.

Caucasia is set in the 1970s and 1980s in the Northeast of the United States. It is written from the perspective of a young girl called Birdie Lee. Birdie’s father, Deck, is a Black race theorist, “obsessed with theories about race and white hypocrisy” (22). Birdie’s mother Sandy is white and descends from a prominent Boston family. She focuses on racial activism instead of theory, and believes that Deck “thinks too much to be of use to anybody” (23). These conflicts eventually contribute to the breakup of their marriage. Birdie has a sister named Cole, with whom she is very close while growing up. Cole is “cinnamon-skinned” and “curly-haired” (5), whereas Birdie is described as having “straight hair” and “pale skin” (128). Thus, both Birdie and Cole are biracial, but Cole is visibly Black whereas Birdie can present as white. However, Birdie is not exclusively viewed as white, as characters see “a myriad of racial and ethnic identities when they look at Birdie”, for instance Cape Verdean, Indian and Native American (Dennihy 159). Therefore, throughout the novel many racial identities are assigned to Birdie.

As a small child, Birdie is unaware of her lighter skin tone, and sees Cole as a reflection of herself. She indicates “before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister” and “that face was me and I was that face” (5). In their youth, Cole and Birdie come up with a language and imaginary world called Elemeno, whose people are “a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility” (7). In this world, Birdie and Cole can “escape the hegemony of racial typology” (Dagbovie-Mullins 63). By striving for invisibility, they place themselves outside the racial issues that are going on in the world. Specifically, Boston in the 1970s “was a battleground”, in which “forced integration” led to many conflicts (*Caucasia* 7). Yet, Cole and Birdie’s fantasy cannot last. Birdie’s environment slowly makes her realize that she looks different from Cole and will have distinct experiences in life.

Birdie notices how people in her close circles but also strangers define her by the lightness of her skin. Birdie’s mother, for instance, calls her “a little Sicilian” (27). Birdie is unaware of what this means but feels that “it sounded dirty off my mother’s tongue” (27). Looking in the mirror later that night, she realizes that there is a difference between her and Cole: “Her hair was curly and mine was straight, and I figured that this fact must have had something to do with the fighting and the way the eyes of strangers flickered surprise, sometimes amusement, sometimes disbelief, when my mother introduced us as sisters” (29). Furthermore, when Birdie and her father visit the Public Gardens, police are called on them by other visitors, who do not believe Deck is Birdie’s father, implying that he might have kidnapped or abused her. Birdie wonders what her sister would do if this happened to her, and realizes that “she wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place” (61). Thus, Birdie becomes aware that double consciousness has another layer for her: as a white-looking individual in a mixed family, she learns to look at herself through white eyes who do not believe she belongs with her Black father. In short, Birdie’s appearance often causes her to not be viewed as Black, which affects how she is treated by her environment.

Furthermore, Birdie’s father treats her differently than Cole. Birdie indicates that Deck “never had much to say to me. In fact, he never seemed to see me at all” (55). Cole, on the other hand, is his favorite, since Deck can hold on to his Blackness through her after adapting to white environments for many years. As Birdie later realizes, Deck had to contend with white people seeing him “as evidence that the black race was indeed human” (56), and he spent a long time “perfecting his irony and stale wit” (56) to differentiate himself from Black people viewed as inferior. Eventually, he internalized this role to such an extent that he felt like other Black people might be “laughing at him, mocking his stiff posture and tight smile" (56). Cole's darker body represents the fact that he is still Black and still human, and that he did not become the role he played for so many years: "Her existence told him he hadn't wandered quite so far and that his body still held the power to leave its mark" (56). Despite trying to get his attention by repeating his theories on race and even doing "slapstick routines" (74), Birdie does not feel seen by her father. As Dagbovie indicates, Birdie experiences "body betrayal", as she feels that "her body decodes her, makes her invisible" (101). Since Birdie's looks present her as white even though she is biracial, she "seems to vanish symbolically" (Dagbovie 102). This represents the social construction of race: while Birdie and Cole have the same genetics, they are treated differently by the outside world and their parents.

Throughout the novel, Birdie performs Blackness, whiteness and different gradations within these identity categories. As a biracial individual Birdie does not neatly fit in the identity categories of Black and white. Yet, the binary view of identity prevalent in society wants Birdie to correspond to one of these boxes. Birdie therefore chooses to present herself as either Black or white, by enhancing features viewed as belonging to these categories. Her biracial identity, however, will never completely disappear. Thus, Birdie is not specifically passing since she does not fit in a rigid identity category to begin with. Birdie generally presents herself as Black or white when she is surrounded by a Black or white majority, and adapts to this majority "in order to protect herself from being ostracized or from social scorn" (Grassian 322). Yet, she is not fully comfortable with either of the identity categories that she performs. Her experiences eventually teach her to define her own identity in a world that often still thinks in black and white. As Dennihy indicates, Birdie's identity throughout the novel "changes by circumstance" and Birdie responds and adapts to "context and audience, motivation and necessity" rather than committing "to a singular racial identity" (171). There are two main situations in which Birdie consciously performs a racial identity: when Birdie attends a Black Power School with her sister Cole she performs Blackness, and when she is on the run from the FBI with her mother she performs whiteness.

The names assigned to the characters in *Caucasia* exemplify parts of their identity. To begin with, the name Birdie implies a bird: an animal that flies away in search of safety, and can adapt itself to its surroundings. These characteristics can be viewed in Birdie's character too, as she is in flight with her mother, moving from place to place and eventually settling down where it is safe. Furthermore, Birdie adapts herself to her environment by presenting herself as either Black or white. Throughout her life, different names are assigned to Birdie. When she is born, Birdie's father wants to call her after Patrice Lumumba, "the Congolese liberator" (19), which would connect Birdie's name to her Black heritage. Birdie's mother wants to call her Jesse, after her "great-grandmother, a white suffragette" (19), connecting Birdie more to her mother's side of the family. Her sister eventually calls her Birdie and this name sticks, though she "answered to all three names with a schizophrenic zeal" (19). Thus, Birdie responds to all possible names, quickly adapting herself to the identity another person wants to assign to her. Yet, Birdie does not seem to fully relate to either of the names her parents want to give her, and eventually feels most comfortable with the name chosen by her biracial sister, which implies that a state "in between" Black and white is where Birdie feels most at ease. The name of her sister, Cole, brings to mind associations with coal, which is black. Therefore, Cole's name is symbolically used to portray her Blackness. In short, both Birdie's several names portray the instability of her identity, and the name Birdie exemplifies the state "in between" identity categories that she embodies.

When Birdie attends the Nkrumah school, she consciously performs Blackness. Birdie and Cole are homeschooled until their parents send them to a Black Power school, where Birdie is made to feel invisible and different due to her lighter skin. When registering at the school with their mother, the woman at the front desk looks at Cole and asks "Is this our new student?" (43) without acknowledging Birdie. Furthermore, the first conversation that Birdie hears in her new classroom consists of people gossiping about her looks, uttering phrases like "She a Rican or something?" and "What you doin' in this school? You white?" (43). Because the people at her school question her racial identity, Birdie does not feel at home in this Black space and tells Cole that she does not want to go back. Cole, on the other hand, indicates "I kind of like it. It's fun. I want to stay" (47), exemplifying the different experience both sisters have in the school: since Cole has a darker skin color, she is more easily accepted as Black. In short, both Birdie and Cole experience hostility at their new school but Birdie is more actively ostracized due to her whiter body.

The different ways Cole and Birdie are perceived at the school changes the relationship between them: Cole becomes Birdie's "protector" (48), telling the bullies that Birdie is Black and that she should not be messed with. Furthermore, Birdie depends on Cole for advice on how to successfully perform Blackness. Birdie knows that she might lose Cole for good if she doesn't "make more of an effort to blend in" (62), and her performance of Blackness is motivated by a need to keep her sister close. Yet, Cole is made to feel different as well due to the whiteness of her knees and the way her hair looks. She says: "They all laughed at me last week. Just like the time my knees were ashy. 'Cause of my hair. It looks crazy", adding "mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child" (53). Thus, both Cole and Birdie do not fully fit in at their new school, but for Cole this results from "a white-inflected cultural upbringing", whereas for Birdie her "too-white physical body" is a factor too (Rummell 4). The sisters' difference from the other students at school is also expressed through the language both Cole and Birdie use, as Cole tells Birdie they "talk like white girls" (53). In conclusion, Birdie adapts herself to her classmates to prevent losing Cole. Cole takes on the role of Birdie's protector, which changes the dynamic between the sisters.

Though Birdie has every right to belong at Nkrumah due to her Black heritage, her body does not mark her as Black and she has to continuously perform her Blackness to fit in. There are several ways in which Birdie attempts a performance of Blackness. Firstly, she changes the way she looks, wearing her hair "in a tight braid to mask its texture" (62) and buying new clothes similar to the ones worn by her classmates. Furthermore, she alters her manner of speaking to talk in "Black English" as described in a magazine article Cole finds (53). Birdie practices "how to say 'nigger' the way the kids in school did it, dropping the ‘er’ so that it became not a slur, but a term of endearment: *nigga*” (63). Schechner’s performance theory becomes very apparent in these instances: Birdie is training and rehearsing for her performance as Black, and is dependent on the audience’s approval for inclusion in their community.

Birdie’s changes in both looks and language are successful, and she is accepted as Black by her classmates and included in a friend group. However, Birdie remains scared of being excluded. She indicates: “I never lost the anxiety, a gnawing in my bowels, a fear that at any moment I would be told it was all a big joke” (64). By altering the person she has grown up to be, Birdie feels “void of a stable core or identity” (Grassian 325). Birdie ponders that at Nkrumah she first learned “how to become someone else, how to erase the person I was before” (62). Yet, the fact that Birdie can present herself as Black questions if there even is an authentic identity, or whether identity is continuously in flux and Birdie’s Black identity is simply part of who she is. Birdie’s performance of Blackness at school calls into question the traditional definition of passing, which views identity categories such as race as essential and fixed. According to the one-drop rule, Birdie is Black and there would be no need for her to go out of her way to perform Blackness. Yet, due to her looks Birdie is often viewed as white and has to “act out” Blackness to be accepted in a Black community. As Rummell outlines, “her performance must be so convincing that it trumps the visible” (4). Thus, Birdie has to enhance her Blackness to be recognized as Black by her environment, losing a strong sense of identity in the process.

Additionally, Birdie has to perform whiteness and Jewishness when she leaves Boston together with her mother to evade the FBI. Her parents decide that the family should split up, and the children leave with the parent they look like most: Cole goes to Brazil with her father and his girlfriend, whereas Birdie passes through several states in the Northeast of the US with her mother. Since Sandy thinks that the FBI is searching for a white woman and her Black daughter, she wants to use Birdie’s body to conceal themselves. As Birdie indicates, “the fact that I could pass … would throw them off our trail" (128). Birdie compares leaving Boston with a disappearance and ponders "one day I was there, the next I was gone" (1). As Dagbovie argues, this disappearance takes place in a literal sense, since Birdie "physically vanishes from her school, her neighborhood, and her life as Birdie Lee" (100). Additionally, Birdie vanishes symbolically, as her "blackness disappears when she and her mother escape from Boston" (Dagbovie 100). Birdie feels that her departure from Boston erases her former identity, as she defines herself as "a body without a name or a history" (1). This body is then assigned a white and Jewish identity: Sandy decides that Birdie should be called Jesse, the name she wanted for her daughter all along. Also, Sandy chooses a backstory in which Birdie is the daughter of a Jewish classics professor called David Goldman. Furthermore, Sandy changes her identity too, and settles on the name Sheila. Birdie comes up with this name, as it describes a woman in a magazine who "was blond, and looked the way my mother might have looked if she had more control over her appetite, if she had never met my father, if she had stayed in Cambridge, gone to Radcliffe, married a doctor" (129). Sandy knows that her new name will represent "a certain origin, social stature and kind of whiteness" (Dennihy 166). Therefore, by choosing this name she reclaims the privileged life she was born in, disconnecting herself from her past with Deck. In short, Sandy takes on an upper-class white identity after leaving Boston, whereas Birdie performs whiteness and Jewishness.

Birdie's performance of Jewishness is significant in the novel, as it does not portray whiteness "as a monolithic category" (Harrison-Kahan 21). Rather, the position of Jewishness on the racial spectrum "simultaneously signifies whiteness and racial otherness", and has "complex meanings across categories of identity" (Harrison-Kahan 22). Birdie's mother lets Birdie pass for Jewish since she views the Jewish identity to be as close to a Black identity as possible. She indicates: "Tragic history, kinky hair, good politics … It's all there" (140), and adds to this that "Jews weren't really white, more like an off-white" (140). Furthermore, she comes up with a backstory in which Birdie's Jewish father has "an afro, the way Jews have sometimes" (131). The fact that Birdie presents as white and Jewish necessitates a kind of “double passing”, since “Birdie can pass for Jewish and within that fictional Jewishness pass as white in Caucasia” (Enlow 192). Birdie does not seem to attach much importance to her new identity, indicating that “mostly my Jewishness was like a performance we put on together for the public” (140). At the beginning of their time in New Hampshire, Birdie’s Jewish identity is helpful as it can “explain her appearance” (Dennihy 170). However, when Birdie is later bullied for being Jewish, she tells her friends that she’s “not *really* Jewish”, and removes her Star of David (257). Therefore, once she is regarded as white by her environment, Birdie “finds it advantageous to deemphasize ‘Jesse’s’ Jewishness in order to perform the same type of white identity her peers claim” (Dennihy 171). In conclusion, Birdie’s performance of Jewishness exemplifies that whiteness is not a clear-cut category.

After traveling around for a few years, Birdie and her mother arrive in a small predominantly white town in New Hampshire, “made up mostly of poor farmers and trailer parks” (143). The fact that Birdie and Sandy are settling down makes Birdie feel that more of her former identity is erased: her real father Deck is fading out of her memory, whereas her made-up father David is “clear as day” in Birdie’s mind (188). At this point, her new identity changes from being “a game” (189) to something more serious, as Birdie’s new name does not sound “make-believe” anymore, and the objects in her negrobilia box seem “remnants from a life of some other girl” (190). When Birdie enters her new school, she is not immediately accepted as other students think she looks strange and call her “the fuckin’ freakazoid”, mentioning that she “looks like she’s from another planet” (220). Only after they talk to Birdie and Birdie uses “some lingo” she learned at Aurora, telling them that she smoked with Nick, they “exchange impressed glances” (221) and include Birdie in their group of friends. Therefore, as Dennihy indicates, “their initial refusal to accept her vanishes once she proves she can speak their language” (169). In short, at both schools Birdie attends she adapts her language to her surroundings and passes linguistically.

Furthermore, Birdie adjusts her gender performance in New Hampshire. Birdie describes herself as dressing “in oversized tomboy clothes”, with an “old-fashioned” look to her (220). When she becomes friends with Mona, she has to play “catch-up”, learning “how to be a girl” (227). Thus, Birdie has to adapt to the New Hampshire standards of what constitutes a girl: “I talked the talk, walked the walk, swayed my hips to the sound of heavy metal, learned to wear blue eyeliner and frosted lipstick and snap my gum” (233). As Rummell argues, Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender is reinforced in the novel. Birdie learns how to behave as is expected of her, and through continuous practice these norms become normal to Birdie. Therefore, “gender and racial passing are not merely parallel; they are intimately intertwined” (Rummell 7). Only by performing both can Birdie fit into her new surroundings. In short, Birdie’s time in New Hampshire requires her to take her identity as Jesse more seriously, involving language and her gender performance in the process.

Birdie still makes a distinction between her performance as Jesse and her “real” identity as Birdie. Though fellow students often make racist remarks, such as “nigga, spic, fuckin’ darkie”, Birdie is not very affected by this as she feels safe in the “pantomime” of her performance (233). She believes that her “real self – Birdie Lee – was safely hidden” and would at the right moment be revealed, “frozen solid in the moment" in which she had been left (233). Thus, Birdie implies that there is a disconnect between her “real” and performed identity. As a result, she feels that her performance “serves to confirm rather than surrogate her black identity” (Elam 760). However, Birdie realizes how much the boundaries between performance and reality have started to blur when she returns to Boston. She indicates that “the name Jesse had been a lie, but as I walked home that day, I wasn’t sure the girl Jesse had been such a lie,” and adds to this “I wondered if whiteness were contagious. If it were, then surely I had caught it. I imagined this ‘condition’ affected the way I walked, talked, dressed, danced, and at its most advanced stage, the way I looked at the world and at other people” (329). Though recognizing that Jesse is not real, Birdie has lived and performed as

Jesse for so long that being Jesse comes more naturally to her than being Birdie. In short, Birdie's acts of passing slowly become all-encompassing, leading her to wonder if she has become Jesse.

Birdie's time in New Hampshire also includes instances of class passing. When Birdie's mother chooses a New Hampshire town to live in, she takes into account its proximity to a university. Counting on the naivety of academics in not checking her references, she indicates that to get a job "she could play the part when she needed to, and, these days at least, she looked like an eccentric professor's wife" (143). Thus, Sandy wants to act as a professor's wife to gain economic advantages, enacting a performance of a class higher than she is part of at that moment. In doing so, "Sandy performs the same self she becomes in Cambridge and Concord", for instance when she visits her parents (Dennihy 167). An important instance of class passing takes place when Sandy finds a cottage for her and Birdie to live in, and they meet up with the landlord. He is called Walter Marsh and "teaches English at the university in the next town over" (147). Walter and his wife Libby are part of the intellectual circles that Sandy wants to enter. During this meeting, Birdie's mother convincingly creates a new class identity for Birdie and herself.

Language, behavior and appearance are all elements that contribute to Sandy's successful performance of affluent whiteness. To begin with, Birdie describes her mother as "a tall, statuesque, blue-blooded woman," whom she had "never seen so appropriate" in terms of clothing (149). Furthermore, Sandy has lost weight, and was now "the woman her mother always wanted her to be – willowy, fragile, feminine, a shadow of her former self" (145). When Birdie looks at her mother, she ponders "if I blurred my eyes she could have been somebody who belonged here for real" (148). Thus, Sandy's physical appearance corresponds with the view both Birdie and the Marshes have of "upper-class whiteness" (Dennihy 166). Additionally, Sandy involves herself in subjects that occupy the class she wants to "pass" as. She talks with Walter about possibly sending Birdie to boarding school, and Birdie almost believes it before realizing that they "had no money" (148). Also, Walter and Libby recognize Sandy as one of them through the way she speaks, asking her "inconsequential questions” to prove “that she spoke their language” (149). Furthermore, Sandy’s voice is described as “an educated voice”, and Birdie indicates that “they heard her accent, so like their own, and knew she would do just fine” (150). Thus, Sandy’s performance of an upper-class identity creates a strong backstory for Birdie and herself, allowing them easier acceptance in their new environment despite Birdie’s ambiguous looks.

Birdie also moves between social classes in the novel. She spends a lot of time with the Marsh family, but also with her working-class friends, adjusting her class performance to the people she is with. When Birdie is with her friends, she enacts the role of “one of those New Hampshire girls” (233), dressing and behaving similar to them: “full makeup, stuffed bras, skintight jeans, hardened hair” (279). When she is with the Marshes, Birdie sometimes loses herself in imagining she can be “the daughter they never had” (194) and starts copying their speech in the process. Thus, Birdie keeps up her upper-class performance through language. Birdie begins speaking “differently, affectedly, trying to imitate Libby’s long nasal drawl” (194). Additionally, she starts using expressions she “heard Nicholas use”, such as “fuckwit. Loser. Awesome. Bummer” (194). The Marshes view Birdie and her mother as a mystery, but are certain of their upper-class status. When Libby Marsh describes Birdie and her mother, she indicates that they “reek of class” but she “can’t figure them out” (194). The Marshes praise Birdie’s “classic features”, pointing out that “she looks Italian” and telling her that she and Nicholas “could be brother and sister” (195). Nicholas projects a different racial fantasy on Birdie, describing her as “Pocahontas” (212), thereby “investing the girl’s appearance with an exotic attraction” (Landers 26). The Marshes’ acceptance of Birdie’s new identity therefore not only includes a class element, but also a racial element. They view her as white but like projecting their racial identity of choice on her features.

There are several differences between the portrayal of racial passing in *Passing* and *Caucasia.* To begin with, Birdie not only performs whiteness but also Blackness, “reversing the usual passing dynamic” that takes place in *Passing* (Rummell 3). Furthermore, when Birdie attends the Nkrumah school, she realizes that she might lose her connection to Cole if she does not fit into this environment. Thus, Birdie's performance of Blackness is not only motivated by preventing exclusion from a group, but also by "a need to *keep* her 'black' family (Cole)" (Rummell 4). Similarly, Birdie's performance of whiteness keeps her closely connected to her mother, since her mother decides which identities Birdie has to perform. When Clare passes, on the other hand, she loses most ties to the Black community she grew up in. Additionally, Birdie's performance of Blackness and whiteness is not motivated by a need to gain a higher economic status. Rather, during the time she presents as Black "Birdie actually fantasizes that her economic status is deteriorating" when she is at her friend Maria's house, imagining she has Maria's life (Rummell 4). In addition, Birdie's performance of whiteness is mainly motivated by keeping out of the hands of the FBI, and economic concerns play a secondary role. Clare's passing, however, is focused on gaining the privileges that come with membership to a higher class. Similar to Irene, Birdie adjusts her racial performance in situations in which it is necessary or the safest option. Yet, Irene only passes for short periods. Birdie and Clare, on the other hand, present themselves as Black or white for longer periods, to the extent where they cannot be fully defined by one identity category anymore.

Birdie is motivated to end her performance as Jesse due to the presence of another biracial girl, Samantha. Samantha is bullied and looked down upon by the other students, making Birdie realize that she is only accepted because of her successful performance of whiteness. Thus, "Samantha's presence as another biracial body that does not belong in Caucasia makes Birdie unable to shake her own incongruous identity unfit for Caucasia" (Enlow 197). When Birdie finds and meets her father again after many years apart, she still feels the same sense of invisibility that she felt when she was younger. He indicates that he has been back in the United States for five years, but did not attempt to find Birdie as it "was going to be difficult – a real project" (389). Birdie expresses the fact that she has been presenting as white for years: "Papa, do you even know where I've been? Do you even care? I've been living as a white girl, a Jewish girl" (391). Deck does not acknowledge Birdie's experience but rather asserts: “But baby, there’s no such thing as passing. We’re all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It’s a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That’s just the absurdity of the whole race game” (391). Thus, Deck argues that race is socially constructed and performed, and that Birdie simply switched between two identity groups. However, in doing so, Deck is “dismissing and trivializing Birdie’s passing as not really passing”, ignoring the mental suffering and “feelings of invisibility” that accompanied Birdie’s last few years (Dagbovie 103). In saying race does not exist, Deck simplifies the concept of race without taking into account its lived experience. Furthermore, he denies that “race is the deciding factor in both the family diaspora and parental betrayal” (Elam 754). Additionally, Deck does not recognize his own racial bias which he expressed by favoring Cole. Birdie notes this and asserts: “If race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum ‘cause I looked white” (393). Cole later tells Birdie: “He’s right, you know. About it all being constructed. But … that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist” (408). And Birdie replies, “they say you don’t have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don’t” (408). Thus, Cole and Birdie acknowledge that while race is constructed, people are still assigned identity categories in society depending on the way they look and act.

Birdie is only able to create an identity for herself, not influenced by her parents or environment, at the end of the novel. When in San Francisco, she learns from Cole that there are other biracial students at the local high school: “If you ever thought you were the only one, get ready. We’re a dime a dozen out here” (412). Later, while walking on a San Francisco street, a girl in a school bus catches Birdie’s attention: “It was a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl” (413). In this scene, Birdie defines herself as Black and mixed, rather than having to adhere to either Blackness or whiteness as she did in the past. Therefore, she creates an identity category that is not fully Black or white but somewhere in between, recognizing that strict racial boundaries do not accurately represent who she is. In doing so, she deconstructs the traditional idea that passing consists of a movement from a “real” to a “made-up” identity. Rather, she views identity as fluid and performative. Yet, she also realizes that it is impossible to “escape racial categorization”, and that there are often societal expectations of a certain racial performance (Dennihy 172). Similar to Clare in *Passing,* Birdie occupies a place “in between” the identity categories that are deemed relevant by society. However, contrary to *Passing*, *Caucasia* does not end in tragedy as, “Senna invests Birdie with a self-chosen identity denied earlier passers” (Rummell 12). Thus, the ending of the novel allows Birdie to choose her own path and find a community of other mixed individuals, which the rigid society around Clare did not allow her to do. In short, *Caucasia* portrays a deconstruction of fixed identity categories, since Birdie’s multiple performances exemplify the complexity of racial categorization.

Chapter 4. Questioning the Authenticity of Fixed Identities in *The Vanishing Half*

This chapter will investigate *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett, focusing on racial identity, transgender identity and the role of performance in the narrative. I will argue that the novel explores the shortcomings of fixed identity categories through the narratives of Stella and Reese. The novel examines the social construction of race and gender, allowing its characters room to explore their identities while still acknowledging the reality of racism, colorism and transphobia. Thus, the novel portrays identity as fluid and performative rather than authentic and permanent.

The Vanishing Half follows twin sisters Desiree and Stella Vignes, who grow up in the 1940s and 50s in a small town Louisiana town called Mallard. Mallard was founded in 1848 by Desiree and Stella's great-great-great-grandfather, Alphonse Decuir. Decuir had a white father who owned his Black mother as a slave. He never felt fully accepted by his mother due to his lighter skin, as "she'd shoved him under the sun, begging him to darken" (5). He married a lighter woman, with the hope of creating "a more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before" (6). This passage refers to the phrase "a more perfect union" in US Constitution. It is used ironically here, since in the eyes of white, prejudiced society "perfection" cannot be reached by anyone classified as Black by the one-drop rule. Furthermore, Decuir's association of perfection with lightness exemplifies Du Bois's idea of double consciousness, since he has internalized negative perceptions towards darker skin. Mallard remains a town in which "nobody married dark" (5) and dark skin is synonymous with "ugliness" (64). Years later, its inhabitants are described as "fair and blonde and redheaded, the darkest ones no swarthier than a Greek" (6). Thus, Stella and Desiree grow up in a town which is built on colorism.

The existence of Mallard calls into question traditional notions about race, in which there is a clear distinction between whiteness and Blackness, with one of these identities being "authentic". Though the one-drop rule classifies Mallard's inhabitants as Black, their appearance does not always adhere to this image. Therefore, Mallard is a third space that does not comply with societal expectations of what Blackness or whiteness entails. As Mallard’s founder indicates: “A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes. A third place” (5). The existence of Mallard exemplifies that race is socially constructed: its citizens are classified as Black solely due to their ancestry, which gives them a subordinate position in life. Yet, there are no biological features that distinguish them from Americans classified as white.

Though the twins’ looks challenge the legitimacy of rigid racial categorization, their family still experiences discrimination due to their perceived Blackness. Stella and Desiree are described as having “creamy skin, hazel eyes, wavy hair” (6). Because of their looks, the sisters can present as white and Black by choosing which identity category to enhance. Yet, Mallard is known as a “colored” town and their direct environment is aware of the Black heritage of the Vignes family. As a result, they are the target of racism and hate crimes. When the twins are young, their father Leon is lynched twice: he is falsely accused of writing unpleasantries to a white woman, though he is unable to read or write. The first lynching took place “at home while his twin girls watched through a crack in the closet door, hands clamped over each other’s mouths until their palms misted with spit” (33). Leon survived this first lynching and was later shot in the head while recovering in the hospital. The traumatic experience of their father’s lynching changes Desiree’s and Stella’s outlooks on life, both in a different manner.

Firstly, Desiree realizes that society will always view her as Black due to her Black heritage, and that this will be accompanied by oppression and violence. She indicates that “you were supposed to be safe in Mallard – that strange, separate town – hidden amongst your own. But even here, where nobody married dark, you were still colored and that meant that white men could kill you for refusing to die” (35). Desiree opposes the tradition of marrying light in Mallard by marrying a darker man, and giving birth to her daughter Jude, who is described as “blueblack” (5). She recognizes that while her father had such light skin she could see “the blue of his veins” (9), he was still murdered.

Consequently, Desiree wonders “how could she care about lightness now?” (9), understanding that the binary view of race in society will always regard her as Black, irrespective of her exact skin tone.

Secondly, experiencing the trauma of the lynching motivates Stella to create a new life by leaving Mallard. Stella has nightmares in her youth centered around this trauma, which always include “white men grabbing her ankles and dragging her screaming out of bed” (150). Furthermore, Stella experiences a second trauma that eventually propels her to leave home. When the twins have finished tenth grade, their mother Adele decides that the girls “had enough schooling”, and that due to financial difficulties “she needed them to work” (10). Consequently, she finds the girls a job cleaning the house of a rich white family, the Duponts. While working for this family, Stella is sexually assaulted by Mr. Dupont, who “followed her into the pantry, shut the door, and stuck his hand in her dress. Three times he’d touched her and himself too” (154). Stella never tells anyone about this experience, but remains fearful that it will happen again. As Reznick outlines, “the sexual assault is an indirect percussion of the lynch [*sic*] of her father”, since the lynching resulted in the girls having to work and not being protected by their father anymore (4). When Desiree talks about leaving Mallard, “Stella felt Mr. Dupont showing her against the pantry shelf and knew she had to go too” (155). Therefore, the sexual assault and the lynching form a motivation for Stella to leave Mallard, as she does not want to re-experience her traumas.

The twins’ wish to escape leads them to New Orleans, where Stella starts presenting herself as white. The first time Stella does so, she is motivated by practical concerns. After being fired from a laundry job, she applies for a secretarial position at an office that “would never hire a colored girl” (61). The sisters are out of money and reason “why should the twins starve because Stella, perfectly capable of typing, became unfit as soon as anyone learned that she was colored?” (61). Thus, the twins consciously choose to leave out Stella’s Black heritage to gain material advantages and be able to survive in the city. They know Stella has the same qualities as other applicants but that the company will not hire her since the one-drop rule classifies her as Black. Consequently, they acknowledge that race is socially constructed but that society still assigns certain characteristics to race.

Stella is hired for the secretarial job and starts presenting herself as white daily, becoming "Miss Vignes, or as Desiree called her, White Stella" (187). Stella regards being white as a role and acknowledges that she is consciously performing a white identity. She indicates that "she was living a performance where there could be no audience", and that "only a person who knew her real identity would appreciate her acting" (187). Contrarily to Clare in *Passing*, Stella does not enjoy having an audience, striving to keep "White Stella" separate from Desiree. Her performance of whiteness allows Stella to create a new life story for herself: "She imagined another life, another past. No footsteps thundering up the porch steps, no ruddy white man grabbing her father, no Mr. Dupont pressing against her in the pantry" (187). Imagining this new past permits Stella to disconnect from her traumas, pretending that she has not experienced them. This is expressed when Stella is on her way to her job, where she decides every day to "let her mind go blank, her whole life vanishing, until she became new and clean as a baby" (187). In this passage, Stella's performance of white is defined as the creation of a new identity "by which Stella *becomes* another person", rather than "a masquerade of a real identity" (Reznick 5). Therefore, while her performance of whiteness is directly caused by practical concerns, Stella's traumatic past motivates her to continue doing so.

Stella cements her performance of whiteness by finding comfort and safety in a white man who does not know about her past. Her boss at her secretarial job, Blake Sanders, soon begins to take an interest in her. Stella appreciates Blake's kindness and the feelings of safety that their connection brings her. She realizes that "when she was with Blake, no one bothered her. The leering white men who'd tried to flirt with her at her stop now fell suddenly silent; the colored men sitting in the back didn't even look in her direction" (187). Thus, being with Blake allows Stella to feel secure and his protection can prevent a repetition of her traumatic past. She is regarded as "Blake's girl" by her coworkers, a role that permits her to feel "she had been changed somehow", securing her new identity (187). Blake also offers Stella comfort. She ponders that “before Blake, she never felt comfortable” (154), and indicates that she appreciates Blake’s wealth. When Blake tells Stella he is moving to Boston and asks her to join him, she “didn’t give herself a chance to second-guess” (196), agreeing to his request. The sudden departure from New Orleans that follows separates Stella from Desiree, and solidifies Stella’s performance of whiteness, allowing her to “become Miss Vignes for good” (196). Stella gives herself full responsibility for her actions: “She wasn’t some little tugboat, drifting along with the tide. She had created herself. Since the morning she’d walked out of the Maison Blanche building a white girl, she had decided everything” (172). In short, by leaving with Blake Stella distances herself from Desiree and permanently takes on a white identity.

Throughout the novel, Stella struggles to distinguish between the parts of her identity that are “real” and performed. While still working in New Orleans, Stella slips out of her identity as Miss Vignes every night. She views Miss Vignes and Stella as two separate identities, and in the evenings sometimes thinks about what Miss Vignes might be doing, “the way you might think about an old friend” (188). However, her two lives are slowly starting to converge, and Stella wonders “if Miss Vignes was a separate person altogether. Maybe she wasn’t a mask that Stella put on. Maybe Miss Vignes was already a part of her, as if she had been split in half. She could be whichever woman she decided, whichever side of her face she tilted to the light” (189). Thus, Stella starts to feel that Miss Vignes is not an act, but a part of her identity that she can choose to highlight. This feeling increases the longer she presents herself as white. When her daughter Kennedy asks critical questions about Stella’s past, Stella ponders that “sometimes lying was an act of love. Stella had spent too long lying to tell the truth now, or maybe, there was nothing left to reveal. Maybe this was who she had become” (259). Thus, Stella is unsure if she has become the person she performs as. This uncertainty can be viewed with Birdie in *Caucasia* as well. Stella indicates that “she’d lived a life split between two women – each real, each a lie” (260). She realizes that both roles she has played are part of who she is, but do not fully define her. Thus, the novel exemplifies that it is often hard to distinguish "between a performed identity and a given one" (Reznick 6), and questions whether this distinction should even be made.

After marrying Blake and moving to Los Angeles with him, Stella starts making racist remarks toward Black people. When a Black family is announced to move to Stella's affluent neighborhood, Stella surprises her neighbors by responding "You must stop them, Percy", and exclaiming "if you don't, there'll be more and then what? Enough is enough!" (146). Through this racist remark, Stella strengthens her performance of whiteness by playing the part of the prejudiced white citizen. As her husband Blake notices, Stella had "never spoken kindly of a Negro" (147), and Stella's remarks fit into the type of whiteness that she wants to present. Thus, as Reznick outlines, "by joining the discrimination policy of the neighborhood, Stella affirms her White persona" (9). However, Stella's opposition to Black people also results from a need to keep her Black heritage hidden. She recalls an incident where she visited a museum through the entrance normally reserved for white people, and a "colored guard" recognized her as Black (149). During this instance, she realized that presenting herself as white was not solely a case of "boldness", but that it "wasn't that easy" and she might get "caught", specifically by Black people (149). Blake, too, notices that Stella "was jumpy around Negroes" and "wouldn't even hire colored help for the house" (147). In short, though expressing racism fits with Stella's performance as white, it also functions as a way to separate her from Black people so that her white environment will not learn about her Black heritage.

The Black family, the Walkers, do not experience as much resistance as Stella expected since one of them turns out to be a celebrity: "When the news spread that Sergeant Tommy Taylor himself was moving into Sycamore Way, even the most belligerent faltered in their protest" (163). The character of Tommy Taylor is described as "a straitlaced partner of the rowdy hero, always nagging him about paperwork and protocol" (163). Thus, Tommy is coded as good and trustworthy, and familiar to many in the neighborhood. Therefore, the celebrity status and feelings of familiarity that accompany Reginald Walker result in their neighbors tolerating him: "If they had to live next to a

Negro, he might as well be a famous one. A trusted one, even" (163). Yet, the neighbors do not interact much with the Walkers. Stella only observes them through her window, until she spots "her daughter playing dolls in the cul-de-sac with the Walker girl" (165). Immediately, Stella "stormed across the street" and "dragged Kennedy back into the house" (165), knowing she'd reacted too quickly but not being able to stop herself. She explains her actions to her daughter by saying "we don't play with niggers" (165). In this instance, she replicates an incident from her youth, as the same thing happened to the twins while playing with a white girl. Thus, in her performance of whiteness Stella repeats the type of racism she knows. Despite undermining racial hierarchies through her acts of passing, she therefore simultaneously "reaffirms notions of white hegemonic structures" (Sanders 7). In conclusion, the move of a Black family to Stella's white environment leads her to affirm her white identity by expressing racist ideas, maintaining dominant white structures in the process.

Despite her initial resistance against Loretta, Stella eventually decides to visit Loretta to make up for her behavior, which is the start of a friendship between the women. During this friendship, Stella regularly compares her life with Loretta's: Loretta lives in the same wealthy neighborhood, has a good marriage and great friends. Consequently, "Loretta has perceivably attained everything that Stella was afforded with her cloak of whiteness – without having to deny her Blackness" (Sanders 7). Stella ponders that "at least Loretta's parents would be proud. She had come upon her nice things the honest way" (193), implicitly viewing her own performance of whiteness as dishonest. The ability of the Walkers to move into Stella's neighborhood exemplifies that "economic benefits, heightened social standing and political authority" do not have to be connected to whiteness, but can be attained by other races as well (Sanders 7). Stella realizes that "she and Loretta had both wound up in the Estates by marrying well" (193), implying that class is an important factor in the advantages a person has. Thus, Stella's short-lived friendship with Loretta makes her aware of the intersection between race and class, realizing that performing whiteness is not the only option to achieve a certain standard of life.

Stella's and Loretta's friendship is eventually broken up by Stella's daughter Kennedy, who is playing with Loretta's daughter when she says "'I don't want to play with a nigger'" (199). Kennedy is repeating a phrase that she has heard Stella say, which makes Loretta angry. Shortly after the end of their friendship, Stella tells her white friends that Reginald Walker "made her uncomfortable" (200), which leads to white neighbor Percy White throwing a brick through the Walkers' window. The resistance against the Walkers' presence "portrays the grim reality of the salience of race" (Sanders 7). Though the Walkers have attained a similar class standing to the white families in the neighborhood, they still experience racism and violence. Additionally, Stella's performance of whiteness has affected her life to such an extent that she cannot form a long-term friendship with a Black person. Yet, Stella never feels comfortable around white women either, pondering that "even after all these years, she still felt nervous around white women, running out of small talk as soon as she opened her mouth" (157). Stella's discomfort around both white and Black people implies that she does not feel at ease with either Blackness or whiteness, but occupies a more liminal position in between these identity categories.

The Vanishing Half also includes an exploration of transgender identity through the character of Reese. Reese was born in Arkansas as "Therese Anne Carter" (103), but always knew that he identified as male rather than female. Leaving his hometown, he "bought a blue madras shirt and a leather belt with a silver stallion buckle", "began wrapping his chest in a white bandage" and "learned to walk again, legs wide, shoulders square" (103). Thus, moving to a new place allowed Reese to express an identity that has always felt true to him, by embodying features often associated with masculinity. Reese ponders that "it was Therese who felt like a costume. How real was a person if you could shed her in a thousand miles?" (103). This passage questions the fixity of identity categories such as gender: Therese has always felt like an act to Reese, whereas becoming Reese is a form of self-fulfillment. As Reznick indicates, “gender transformation in the novel is depicted as the birth of a new identity, rather than the act of hiding a former one” (6). Thus, the novel explores Butler’s ideas on the performativity of gender, as Butler argues that “sexed bodies” can be separated from “culturally constructed genders” (6). With Reese’s character, the connection between sex and gender that is often assumed to exist is broken, since Reese presents himself as a man while having sexual characteristics generally perceived as female. This exemplifies the social construction of gender: though society assumes a connection between sex and gender, they do not always correspond in reality.

In the novel, remaining safe motivates Reese to “pass” as cisgender, though he is conscious of societal preconceptions regarding race, gender and sexuality. Desiree’s daughter Jude meets Reese at a party after she has moved to Los Angeles for college, noticing “a cowboy sitting on the couch. He was golden brown and handsome, his jaw covered in stubble” (100). Jude does not know that Reese was assigned a female identity at birth, and it can therefore be argued that Reese successfully presents a male and cisgender identity. Other characters assign Reese a male and cisgender identity too. Desiree, for instance, keeps asking when Reese and Jude will get married and have children, unaware that this might not be as easy for them. Reese himself soon realizes that “the only safety was in hiding”, as his transgender identity was discovered by an “angry white man in Westwood”, who “gave him a black eye” (137). Thus, Reese becomes aware that if he is honest about his past “he would be considered a liar” (137). He decides to “pass” as cisgender for his safety. His closest friends know about his transgender identity, and they form a community of individuals that do not regard identities as fixed and permanent. Furthermore, Reese is aware of the power structures that affect gender, sexuality and race. When Jude is in contact with Kennedy, Reese tells her that “you can’t make nobody be what they don’t wanna be” (241), implying that Kennedy might reject the fact that she has Black heritage due to racism. Thus, “Reese never succumbs to the hierarchy of patriarchy and toxic masculinity, cementing that supremacy is a choice, not inherited through a constructed label" (Sanders 7). In short, despite "passing" as cisgender Reese is aware of the effects of power structures in society, choosing not to adhere to these.

The novel distinguishes between transgender identity and drag through the character of Barry. Barry is a friend of Reese who temporarily takes on a female identity during drag performances: "During the week, he taught high school chemistry in Santa Monica; he only became Bianca two Saturdays a month in a tiny dark club off Sunset" (110). Drag queens can be defined as "gay men who dress and perform as but do not want to be women or have women's bodies" (Taylor and Rupp 115). In doing so, drag queens frequently shatter "the illusion of being women", and thereby "accentuate the inherently performative nature of gender and sexual meanings" (Taylor and Rupp 115). Drag queens differ from transgender individuals due to their temporary performance of another gender, in which the audience is made aware of the act. As Jude outlines, "it was fun because everyone knew it was not real" (111). A transgender identity, on the other hand, is not a temporary act but a permanent expression of one's identity. Though Jude first thinks "that Barry might be like Reese", she soon notices that when Barry is not in drag, he looks like "a tall, bald man who looked nothing like a woman, which was part of the delight" (110). Therefore, there is a clear distinction between who Barry is in reality and who Barry is when he performs, whereas Reese's gender expression as male is a permanent identity.

There are several similarities and differences between racial and transgender identity explored in the novel. To begin with, both racially ambiguous and transgender individuals often do not correspond to rigid social categories their environment wants to place them in. Because of Reese's successful "passing" as cisgender he is generally assigned a male identity, but this is not the case for all transgender individuals. Thus, both transgender and racially ambiguous people often have to deal with incomprehension by society regarding their preferred identity. Secondly, racial passing is only accessible for a small group of people with light enough skin to be recognized as white, whereas transgender individuals have more opportunities to alter their bodily characteristics to be perceived as their preferred gender. When Reese first tells Jude about his gender identity, Jude ponders that “she’d always known that it was possible to be two different people in one lifetime, or maybe it was only possible for some. Maybe others were just stuck with who they were” (105). In this passage, Jude refers to her dark skin, for which she was often looked down upon while growing up. She attempted to lighten it during her youth, but realized that her skin would not lighten no matter which creams or potions she used. Thus, Jude will not be able to “pass” but will solely be viewed as Black in the eyes of society. Reese, on the other hand, is more easily able to present himself as male, for instance by using steroids, binding his chest and adopting behavior perceived as masculine.

Through Kennedy, the novel investigates a different type of performance: acting. Jude first meets Kennedy, Stella’s daughter, at a catering job, and later gets a job at the theater where Kennedy performs. She soon realizes that Kennedy “liked to invent stories about her life” (235), and completely changes whenever she is acting: “When the lights hit, she was no longer the sarcastic girl chain-smoking in the alley. She became Dolly, the sweet, carefree nobody lost in an abandoned town” (242). Thus, Kennedy convincingly takes on a new identity that is only distinguishable from her former identity since the audience knows it is a performance. As Desiree ponders at the start of the novel, “the only difference between lying and acting was whether your audience was in on it, but it was all a performance just the same” (13). When Kennedy later plays the role of Charity Harris on the soap opera *Pacific Cove*, the distinction between Kennedy and her character Charity is starting to blur. While filming, “the cast and crew referred to her as Charity, never her real name” (266). Stella does the same when she visits the set, by telling Kennedy: “I sure hope they let you out of there soon”, referring to the kidnapping of Charity (267). Kennedy regards this as a compliment, indicating that “true acting meant becoming invisible so that only the character shone through” (267). Thus, the novel compares passing to acting, since certain parts of the former identity of a passer also have to become invisible for the performance to be successful.

The novel further recognizes the shortcomings of fixed identity categories through Kennedy, who is told about her Black heritage by Jude later in life. Though she learns the one-drop rule would classify her as Black, she still asserts to Jude “I’m not a Negro”, explaining that “it wasn’t a race thing. She just hated the idea of anyone telling her who she had to be” (296). Yet, as Reznick argues, Kennedy makes racist remarks elsewhere in the novel, for instance when she tells Jude that nobody expects her to be with Reese, since “your men usually like the light girls, don’t they?” (251). Thus, this implies that “Kennedy’s choice of ethnicity reflects a desire not to be labeled as African American, rather than a desire to define herself the way she wishes” (Reznick 10). Consequently, Kennedy struggles to accept an identity that she has not been taught to identify with, and has learned to look down upon by her parents. She indicates that “if she’d been born black, she would have been perfectly happy about it” (296). This passage explores the social construction of race: because Kennedy has learned about her Black heritage later in life, she does not identify as Black. This implies that people are taught to label themselves as a certain race, rather than being part of a fixed and authentic racial category. However, Kennedy does not seem to view herself as white anymore either. When thinking about her acting roles, she considers that “she only played white girls, which is to say, she never played herself” (266). Yet, she feels very far removed from a Black identity too, specifically when she dates a Black man who “only made her feel whiter than before” (277). Consequently, though Kennedy has been taught to identify as white, after the revelation of her mother’s racial heritage she does not seem to view herself as either white or Black.

The novel regards the occupation of any social role as a performance, therefore adhering to Schechner’s performance theory. When Jude and Reese are meeting up frequently but not yet dating, Jude recalls the following scene: “Once, carrying her groceries up the stairs, Reese had joked that he sometimes felt like her boyfriend, and she’d laughed, unsure of what was funny. That he wasn’t? That he would never be? That in spite of this, he had, somehow, found himself playing this role?” (114). In this passage, being a boyfriend is regarded as a role that involves certain acts such as helping with groceries. The passage also exemplifies that you can perform a certain role without actually being a member of the category you are performing as. Additionally, when Kennedy is traveling through Europe, she begins to create new stories about herself, taking on different roles in each country: “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” (298). In short, many characters in the novel like to temporarily take on a distinct persona with a different past, demonstrating the performativity of identity.

To conclude, *The Vanishing Half* explores the shortcomings of fixed identity categories by investigating several characters who recognize the fluidity of identity. This is represented through the town of Mallard, as its citizens are perceived as Black by society but do not adhere to this label in looks. Furthermore, Stella presents her identity as Black and white throughout the novel. Both these identities feel simultaneously truthful and fraudulent to her, but do not fully express who she is. Thus, similar to the characters of Clare in *Passing* and Birdie in *Caucasia*, Stella occupies a position “in between” identity categories. Additionally, the social construction of gender is investigated through the character of Reese, whose expression of a male identity is a form of self-realization. Not completely fitting in rigid identity categories is more accepted in *The Vanishing Half* and *Caucasia* as it is in *Passing.* As Sanders outlines, Stella is allowed to struggle with her identity “without the constant fear and consequence of disclosure” (6). Consequently, *The Vanishing Half* allows its characters room to explore their identities, though still portraying the reality of racism, colorism and transphobia. By the end of *Caucasia*, Birdie describes herself as Black and mixed, and Reese in *The Vanishing Half* defines himself as male. Stella, similar to Clare in *Passing*, does not express a straightforward self-definition. Furthermore, *The Vanishing Half* expresses that any social role can be viewed as a performance, recognizing that it is possible to temporarily or permanently perform an identity. Therefore, the novel focuses on the fragility and fluidity of identity categories, acknowledging that fixed identity categories often cannot properly define a person.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to investigate instances of passing and their connection to notions of identity and performance in three novels of American literature: *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen, *Caucasia* (1998) by Danzy Senna and *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett. In doing so, I have used a theoretical framework exploring identity, performance, performativity, double consciousness and the social construction of race.

The concept of passing can be defined as “the movement from one identity group to another, usually from margin to mainstream” (Moriel 167). Passing is based on the idea that there are rigid boundaries between identity groups, as it would not have to exist without these strict binaries. A distinction between two different understandings of passing can be made. In the first and earliest definition identity is defined as fixed and authentic, and passing as a way in which this “real” identity is concealed. According to this definition, passing always involves a sense of fraud since it masks a person’s actual identity. The second, more modern understanding of passing regards identity as performative rather than essential, and passing as a “performative practice” (Caughie 58). This definition recognizes that people can have several and fluid identities, and that identity does not adhere to strict binaries. Yet, though identity can be regarded as performative by the passer, passing is also dependent on the dominant group, who assigns a certain identity category to the passer. Thus, identity categories are often regarded as essential in society, while identity can feel performative for the person moving between identity groups.

The purpose of my thesis was to broaden the focus of research on passing, which is often centered around racial passing. All novels explored in this thesis do not only focus on racial passing, but also investigate other forms of passing and the intersections between these forms of passing. *Passing* includes passing in terms of sexuality, *Caucasia* explores class passing and *The Vanishing Half* incorporates transgender identity. Furthermore, the novels exemplify a change in the portrayal of passing in literature over time.

Passing is set during the Harlem Renaissance and explores the lives of childhood friends Irene and Clare, two light-skinned women with Black heritage. Clare permanently takes on a white identity whereas Irene presents herself as white from time to time. The novel recognizes that identity is performative and fluid through the character of Clare, and is therefore ahead of its time in portraying a critique of a racially divided society. Yet, the death of Clare exemplifies the reality of racial categorization in the 1920s: only fixed perceptions of racial identity were allowed to exist as society adhered to the traditional definition of racial passing.

Caucasia follows the life of a mixed-race girl called Birdie, who is often treated differently by her environment due to her lighter skin. She ends up in two different situations where she consciously chooses to alter her racial performance. When she attends a Black Power school, she performs Blackness. When she is on the run from the FBI with her mother, she performs whiteness and Jewishness. Birdie also moves between social classes, adapting to both an upper-class white environment and the working-class milieu of her friends. She does not fully feel at ease with either of her performed identity categories, and eventually chooses her own identity as a Black and mixed girl.

The Vanishing Half is about two twin sisters, Stella and Desiree, who grow up in a small Southern town called Mallard. Traumatic events drive the twins to run away from Mallard and start a new life in New Orleans. Stella takes on a white identity for practical purposes, which becomes permanent through her marriage to a white man. Desiree's daughter Jude ends up meeting Reese, a transgender man. By expressing himself as male, he embodies an identity that feels true to him. Therefore, Reese's storyline portrays that the connection between sex and gender often assumed by society is socially constructed.

All three novels recognize that whiteness and Blackness are not fixed categories, but that society often wants to place a person in one of these groups. Clare, Birdie and Stella do not fit neatly in racial categories, since their appearance enables them to present themselves as Black and white. While Clare and Stella learn to identify as Black while growing up and later perform a white identity, Birdie has grown up with a white and Black parent, consciously altering her racial performance depending on whether she is around a white or Black majority. Stella and Clare present themselves as white to escape a traumatic past and access privileges belonging to a higher social class. Birdie, on the other hand, presents herself as Black and white to remain safe and ensure easier acceptance in a group. All three characters recognize that identity is performative and that it is possible to take on more than one identity during a lifetime. Though Birdie and Stella at first clearly distinguish between their “real” and performed identity, they slowly start having trouble differentiating between these two selves. The underlying question in both these narratives is whether a person has a fixed and authentic identity, or if the fluidity and performativity of identity prevent a stable identity from existing. Clare represents this liminal state, as she crosses boundaries between identity groups but is never fully defined by one.

In the society of *Passing*, freely moving between identity categories is not accepted yet. Though Clare successfully traverses the categories of Blackness, whiteness, queerness and straightness, the novel exemplifies that this freedom cannot last. The plot centers around the unmasking of Clare’s performance and the revelation of what is regarded by society as her “true” identity. *Caucasia* and *The Vanishing Half* allow their characters more opportunities to investigate what identity fits them best. This is expressed through Birdie’s identification with a Black and mixed identity and Reese’s expression of a male identity. Both characters are aware that society might want to assign them to a specific identity group, and that they may have to deal with prejudice and discrimination. Yet, they are not punished for their actions and are allowed to exist the way they want to. Clare, on the other hand, is not permitted to live on in her state “in between” identity categories, as she passes away at the end of the novel. In short, this thesis argues that whereas *Passing* acknowledges the potential of a performative take of identity but perceives the impossibility of such a way of life in 1920s society, *Caucasia* and *The Vanishing Half* allow their characters more lasting opportunities to deconstruct fixed identity categories and create their preferred identities.

The United States is often seen as a country of binaries, for instance along racial and political lines. This has been embedded in American law as well, exemplified through the one-drop rule and the hypo-descent rule. Yet, these rules are often the only proof of someone’s Blackness. The characters explored in this thesis exemplify that identity is fluid and performative and that societal binaries cannot accurately represent everyone. Thus, these novels explore a different way of thinking about identity. Instead of immediately classifying a person based on their racial heritage or sexual characteristics, it is also possible to let them decide for themselves if and how they want to express their identity. If this way of thinking can expand in the future in American society, more people can have the opportunity to freely create and express their preferred identity, without being limited by societal rules and bounds.

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