“In the dark, you could never be too black. In the dark, everyone was the same”: Passing, Trauma and Colorism in Larsen’s Passing, Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, and Bennett’s The Vanishing Half

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"In the dark, you could never be too black. In the dark, everyone was the same": Passing, Trauma and Colorism in Larsen's *Passing*, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

Master Thesis North American Studies

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Introduction

"The whole of American life [is] a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro"

Ralph Ellison (qtd. in Graham and Singh, xiii)

Ralph Ellison's quote perceptively emphasizes how trauma resulting from slavery, segregation and discrimination has been impacting African Americans throughout time. As a result, the United States is still divided into a caste system. According to Isabel Wilkerson, a caste system is a social construction which ranks individuals in groups; the supremacy of one group against the inferiority of other groups of individuals (17). In the United States, race determines to which position one belongs in the hierarchy (18). This has profound effects on all the groups, but in particular on marginalized communities. One significant effect is the way in which African Americans view themselves. Their culture and identities have been denied and labeled as inferior, which has resulted in a great sense of loss and alienation over time. Additionally, this racially-based oppression, which presents itself through hate crimes and microaggressions, can have traumatizing effects (Craps 26). Not only can those effects can be physical, but trauma can also disrupt memory, for instance by altering the sequence of the traumatic event or through memory loss (Luckhurst 1). In this way, trauma also has an intense effect upon the constructions of (racial) identity, as one's memory is intrinsically entwined with the perception of the self (Stocks 71). Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) all address traumas caused by the American caste system. The novels particularly draw attention to the consequences of these traumas for African Americans and their identities. The novels manage this through their various narrative strategies,

such as shifting the focalization or dramatizing the daily microaggressions in order to make the traumas visible. In this thesis, I will explore how traumas resulting from constant racism are represented in the form and content of the discussed novels, since these traumas accumulate a traumatic impact over time, rather than developing an overwhelming impact all at once (Craps 26). I will argue that even though all three novels challenged the notions of racial identities (at their time of publication) through the use of narrative stylistics, they all use different strategies to achieve this objective. To be more specific, while *Passing* and *The Bluest Eye* use a narrative style which is associated with Modernism and Postmodernism, *The Vanishing Half* adopts narrative devices which can be best explained with Postcolonial trauma theory.

The above-mentioned novels were all written in different time periods, spanning approximately a hundred years. *Passing* was published during the Harlem Renaissance in 1929. During this period, there was a "burst of black creativity" in Manhattan (Mitchell 641), in which many black artists expanded black culture by creating new art, music and literature. Larsen published two novels during this period: *Passing* and *Quicksand* (1928), which were both widely acclaimed by critics. Both novels comment on cultural dualism, the marginal position of black people in American society, and the intersectional position with which black women were faced. In addition, Cheryl Wall points out that *Passing's* most compelling insights are into the "psychic dilemmas" of black women, since it includes atypical protagonists whom emphasize the psychological costs of racism and sexism in relation to their quest for a "wholly integrated identity" (98). This is accomplished by centering *Passing* around the phenomenon of racial passing, in which the main protagonists, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, both racially pass for white. In this manner, the novel explores the psychological costs of adopting false identities in order to gain white privileges and (social) survival.

The Bluest Eye was published in 1970, just after the height of the civil rights movement and during the period of the Black Power movement. *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's debut novel and, as she mentioned in an interview, she had written the novel because she wanted to read a novel dealing with these themes, but could not find it anywhere (Nicholson). Like *Passing*, Morrison's novel explores the discrimination and violence against black people within American society and, more specifically, within the black community. In particular, it questions the ideals of beauty and examines this topic in relation to the different tones of skin color of African Americans. This is explored by focusing the narrative around Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl, who longs to have a lighter skin and blue eyes. Pecola emphasizes how the community has internalized the racism and hate from white people during the segregation era. In this manner, the novel not only incisively points out the trauma, which results from institutionalized racism, but unlike *Passing*, also poignantly stresses what can happen if you cannot change your self-perceived identity as a result of skin color.

Lastly, Bennett's novel was published in 2020, during which discrimination and violence, in particular the police violence, was (and currently is) common. *The Vanishing Half* is her second novel and discusses how racial discrimination and violence during the Jim Crow era has caused long lasting traumas. The plot revolves around the Vignes twins, who grow up in a town in which all its citizens intermarry people with a lighter skin color, so as to make sure that each generation has a lighter complexion than the previous one. In the novel, the identical twins split up after they run away from their hometown and live separate lives, in which Stella decides to pass for white and Desiree does not. Bennett's novel mirrors elements from *Passing* and *The Bluest Eye.* Similar to *Passing*, the novel analyzes the psychological costs to one's identity when one decides to racially pass, which is explored in the storyline of Stella Vignes. In addition, the

novel echoes Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* by pointing out the internalized racism towards skin tones within the black community. The character of Jude, the daughter of Desiree Vignes, also parallels to some extent Pecola Breedlove, since both girls have a darker skin color than their communities would like, and they both suffer from the ideas and prejudices from their villages.

For this reason, *Passing*, *The Bluest Eye* and *The Vanishing Half* are all suited for a comparative analysis, since not only do they all discuss the ongoing traumas of the segregation in the Jim Crow era, and indirectly the trauma of slavery, but they also all emphasize how these traumas affect African American identities. In particular, they explore these traumas through the lens of colorism, since they all stress the consequences of subtle differences in skin tone in American society. Even though previous research has been done on Larsen and Morrison in relation to this topic, this earlier research focuses predominantly on event-based traumas in the novels. Cathy Caruth defines this kind of trauma as a singular overwhelming experience with catastrophic consequences (11). For instance, Angyl Ko explores in "The Shadow of Lynching in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" (2017) how the trope of lynching impacts the protagonists in *Passing*. Similarly, Rosalie Murphy Baum and Emy Koopman center their research of *The Bluest Eye* on the traumas resulting from sexual violence. However, little research has been done on how the ongoing traumas are represented in the novels, and how this representation might deviate from the depiction of event-based traumas. In the debate around the representation of trauma, many scholars, such as Anne Whitehead and Hayden White, favor an experimental writing style, which mimics the frantic symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the form of the novel. Yet, in favoring this style, they fail to acknowledge that not all traumas result in PTSD and exclude the traumas resulting from the impact of ongoing racism. Besides, only a small amount of research has been done on *The Vanishing Half*, because it was recently published in 2020.

Therefore, I will expand the research that has been done on Larsen and Morrison by specifically focusing on the representation of traumas resulting from ongoing racism. Consequently, I will apply this research to shed light on Bennett's novel.

I will close read the novels focusing on the narrative strategies employed by the authors in the form and content of the novels. These three novels ask for a theoretical framework which can partly be found in literary trauma theory and partly in the studies surrounding racial identity. This combination of approaches is important, because of the event centrality of the traumas; the extent to which a traumatic experience is assumed to be integral to one's life (Wamser-Nanney 43). In the chosen novels, race is the deciding factor causing the oppression, which eventually leads to the traumas. Therefore, the event centrality of the traumas discussed in the novels is intrinsically linked to the racial identity of the protagonists. Besides, in combining these theories, I hope to give a deeper understanding of how distinct traumas can be represented in multiple ways. Regarding the approach in literary trauma studies, this thesis draws upon the works of several scholars, such as Stef Craps, Roger Luckhurst, Silvia Martínez-Falquina, and Rosanne Kennedy. In combining the works of these scholars, I aim to create a more insightful understanding of the novels, as I will not only pay attention to the characteristics which are most commonly associated with trauma theory, such as the modernist and experimental style which often resemble the symptoms of PTSD, but, more importantly, I will also consider how these texts can deviate from this narrative style. For instance, I will include postcolonial theory, in which authors frequently draw attention to the articulation of traumas resulting from colonialism.

In addition, I will draw upon W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness and Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry. Whereas Du Bois's concept focuses on the conflicting inner divisions in African American identities, Bhabha's theory concentrates on the external relations

between the dominant and the marginalized communities. In his theory, Bhabha depicts how colonized people mimic the values and attitudes from the colonizer to ultimately mock and question their authority. I have chosen to analyze the novels vis-à-vis these two theories, because they both point out how racial degradation incites conflicts and confusion in someone's racial identity, either by emphasizing the internal struggle of African Americans or by describing the ambivalent relation between a colonizer and the colonized. Even though colonialism and the Jim Crow South are two different systems, Dimple Godiwala emphasizes that Bhabha's theories, and postcolonial theory in general, can be applied to "any hierarchized subject who perceives the values of another group as superior to his or her own and aspires to the ideologically constructed behaviour, attitudes, and culture of that group" (67). In this sense, the theories deriving from postcolonialism fit well with the other theories relating to trauma and racial identity.

Chapter one will clarify the theoretical framework delineating the approaches taken towards literary trauma theory, postcolonial theory, and racial identity. Afterwards, these theories will be applied to the novels. The second chapter will argue that *Passing* questions essentialist notions of racial identity. This chapter explores Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry's act of passing in order to discover how Larsen's novel subverts the meaning behind passing. Then, *The Bluest Eye* will be examined. In particular, this third chapter will center on how the novel resists dominant ideologies about white beauty. In the fourth chapter, *The Vanishing Half* will be analyzed. This last chapter will consider how Bennett's novel challenges the concept of colorism and subverts the traditional passing tropes. After these four chapters, the three novels will be compared and contrasted with each other in the conclusion. Additionally, I will use Larsen and Morrison's analyses to shed light on Bennett's novel.

Even though the main focus of this thesis is to analyze the traumas resulting from

ongoing racism, some attention will be paid to the event-based traumas in the novels. In all three novels, event-based traumas occur, which are entwined with the ongoing traumas and influence the protagonists as well. This entwinement makes is difficult to determine exactly whether the ongoing discrimination or the event-based trauma caused the traumatic responses. However, the ongoing traumas will be prioritized, since even though event-based traumas are said to be more traumatic, the impact of ongoing racism should not be overlooked.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework, Trauma and Racial Identity

Trauma obtains its meaning from the Greek word 'wound' and before the nineteenth century was defined as a physical injury caused by an external individual or object (Luckhurst 2-3). It was only in the late nineteenth century that the sentiment of trauma as something psychological became entrenched within society. Ann Kaplan points out that trauma is inherently linked with modernity, since it is associated with the inventions and ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which caused various catastrophic conflicts, such as the two world wars, the Holocaust, the war in Vietnam, and the attacks on September eleventh (24). Currently, Kaplan even argues that the notion of psychological trauma has become so fundamental in our society that we are living in a "trauma culture" (21). Since the 1990s, trauma has also become a frequent topic of study within cultural and literary studies. Many scholars, such as Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman and Dominick LaCapra, have drawn their trauma concepts from Sigmund Freud's theories and applied these to literature. They define trauma as an overwhelming experience of a sudden and catastrophic event, in which the trauma cannot be processed while it occurs (Caruth 11). Instead, the traumatic memories are suppressed and only registered outside consciousness, which causes them to be inaccessible to conscious recall (Bond and Craps 4). However, after the traumatic event, they recur in involuntary flashbacks, nightmares or hallucinations (4). Indeed, Lucy Bond and Stef Craps indicate that the specificity of psychological trauma lies in the fact that it is not fully assimilated into consciousness (56). In this sense, it is not the traumatic event itself that causes the traumatizing reaction, but rather the belated "mental experiencing" of it that creates the psychological trauma, since even a shared traumatic experience can vary between people (56).

Additionally, trauma is often associated with PTSD, since trauma can cause symptoms of

PTSD. These symptoms include, but are not limited to, the recurrence of the traumatic memories, the persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic experience, the inability to remember important aspects of the event, a negative emotional state, and negligent or self-destructive behavior (*DSM* Database). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V), one can only get PTSD after one has been exposed to a traumatic event. Trauma, in accordance to the fifth edition of the *DSM*, is defined as an exposure to an "actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence", in which the individual must have either experienced the traumatic event, witnessed it directly, or learned that it occurred to "a close family member or friend" (*DSM* database). However, this definition overlooks stressful events which do not involve an actual threat to life or a serious injury, such as ongoing, slow-burning experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia, which may also cause PTSD symptoms. Moreover, the *DSM* centers on the Western world and overlooks many cultural and social differences (Muldoon and Lowe 263). After I have discussed the narrative strategies relating to trauma theory, I will come back to these points of critique and develop this idea further.

This definition of trauma implies that it inherently resists representation. In other words, as a result of the shock during a traumatic experience, the memories cannot be integrated into consciousness and become fragmented creating an "anti-narrative" (Luckhurst 79). Yet, according to various trauma theorists, these features make literature appropriate to bear witness to the trauma and, in this manner, translate the traumatic memories into "narratable memories" (Bond and Craps 59; Bal x). Unlike any other forms of language, Bond and Craps argue literary language is free in its expression and can deviate from the strict rules within a certain discourse (59). For instance, it can explore narrative strategies, rhetoric, and use figurative language and linguistic tools, to influence the relation between the author and the reader, and to convey a

particular message for the reader (59). In this manner, the form, structure, and literary language of a novel provide an important platform for the creation of a narrative structure that, at least in a figurative sense, resembles the storytelling of a trauma (Luckhurst 84). Moreover, literature can actually help with the integration of trauma, because it fulfills a social function; the narration of trauma through literature allows the reader to bear witness to the traumatic experiences, as the trauma is actually addressed to an audience (Bal x). Mieke Bal argues that literature invites others to listen and respond to trauma, since they can come to understand, recognize and sympathize with it (x). In this manner, literature socially functions as a mediator between the author and the reader, which differs from traumatic memories because they have no social function (x). Therefore, literature can articulate the inarticulate experiences of trauma by translating traumatic memories into narrative memories.

Taking this into consideration, the form and narrative strategies in the novel become an important device to represent trauma. Bond and Craps point out that authors often mimic the psychological symptoms of trauma and PTSD in the form of the novel in order to adequately represent trauma (6). For instance, they often create a fragmented and non-linear storyline, suspend the logical causation, play with temporality and narrative time, and create "belated revelations which retrospectively alter the narrative significance" (Luckhurst 80). By using these strategies, the aesthetic of the novel is often associated with narrative stylistics used in Modernism. Like the characteristics of Modernism, trauma literature is defined as experimental, fragmented, and it often rejects any familiar representations and narrative conventions which can be defined as "middle- and lowbrow culture" (89). Thus, this experimental and modernist form of the novel creates the possibility for authors to represent trauma. Additionally, Isobel Armstrong argues that the aesthetic of a novel can make the political possible (43). Even though

the aesthetic is commonly associated with the stylistics of beauty and can be seen as non-purposeful, Armstrong emphasizes that the aesthetic of a novel is actually a political mode, since it is an "culture-modifying space", which is transgressive and communal (40). For example, the aesthetic in trauma novels creates the possibility for the author to convey a message, and when it is linked to a social and political topic, such as racial oppression, the aesthetic inherently becomes political as well. Therefore, the aesthetics of a novel, which includes its form and narrative stylistics, are important devices for an author when writing about traumas which are entwined with social and political problems.

However, by centering the modernist aesthetic, certain scholars have only examined novels which follow these stylistics and have overlooked trauma novels which deviate from them. Roger Luckhurst indicates that among trauma theorists, many favor the experimental style which is associated with Modernism (88). For instance, Anne Whitehead claims that "if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation … then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence" (6). She argues that a novel which attempts to represent trauma cannot be told in a linear way, because the narrative of the novel needs to acknowledge that a traumatic event alters ordinary narrative memory (Whitehead 6). However, Craps calls this assumption "surprisingly prescriptive" and correctly points out the danger in this (41). As a result of this prescriptiveness, the trauma canon can become too limited, since it only consists of the modernist aesthetic, which focuses mostly on (white) Western writers, because Modernism is a European cultural tradition (41). Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy complement this argument by emphasizing that this limited view also "narrow[s] the range of traumatic events, histories and cultural forms" which can be represented (10). Indeed, in only analyzing novels with experimental aesthetics, scholars center a Western definition of trauma which solely focuses on

the PTSD definition established in the *DSM*. However, as previously mentioned, this ignores accumulated traumas which result from the impact of ongoing racism. Stef Craps argues that daily microaggressions can accumulate over time and can insidiously create traumatizing effects: "each one is too small to be a traumatic stressor, but together they can build to create an intense traumatic impact" (26). Rather than a single catastrophic event, trauma is "a constant presence [or] a continuing background noise" for many minorities (33). Thus, by excluding anything that deviates from the modernist mode of representation in trauma novels, one fails to identify any trauma novel which discusses other forms of trauma, such as traumas resulting from historical and racial oppression.

For this reason, I will concentrate on how accumulated traumas are represented in novels by including the postcolonial theories of Stef Craps, Silvia Martínez-Falquina, and Rosanne Kennedy. For instance, Craps argues that a "no-frills" style of writing can allow for alternative modes of addressing the reader, in which the author reinforces a critical self-reflection and mobilization by its readers. He examined testimonies from the Stolen Generation in Australia. These testimonies, in which white Australians are addressed, do not ask the reader for empathy, but rather invite them to become conscious of their own role in the ongoing oppression and silencing of the Aboriginal history (Craps 42). He argues that when readers are asked to respond with empathy, the reaction precludes a critical self-reflection from the reader (42). Yet, Craps emphasizes that postcolonial novels often critique this "depoliticization of victims of violence" and actively position the reader in the role of "bystander or potential collaborator" to force them to analyze their part in these oppressive practices (Craps *Intro PCTN* 5; Craps 42). In this sense, the mode of address develops the political message in the novel and encourages readers to politically mobilize (42). The "political urgency" of the novel also explains why authors

consciously favor a “no-frills style”, as Craps points out that “there is a sense that the story must be told” (43). Indeed, the message in the novel is prioritized, which the “no-frills” stylistics enhance by making it accessible to a wider audience. Therefore, rather than relying on the Western-modernist aesthetic, postcolonial literature often adopts a “no-frills” mode in order to “prick [certain] Western consciences” (Eaglestone qtd. in Craps 43).

Martínez-Falquina extends this argument in her analysis on Edwidge Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013). She argues that authors from postcolonial literature find it imperative to articulate colonial trauma and inherently resist the previous invisibility of these traumas (834). For example, she indicates that Danticat’s novel emphasizes the grief resulting from colonial trauma by integrating multiple perspectives into the novel (845). In the novel, the reader follows the narratives of various townspeople in Haiti after Claire, a seven-year-old girl, disappears from the village. These perspectives each show “the political implications” in their personal experiences and, in the end, form a “panorama of [the] contemporary Haitian society” (845). By explicitly drawing attention to the colonial traumas and the consequences, Craps indicates that the postcolonial novel insists upon the recognition of these traumas (13). Moreover, Martínez-Falquina observes that these multiple perspectives allow Danticat simultaneously to focus on the damage and suffering caused by trauma, and center the movement towards healing (846). While the former perspective invites a political reading, in which Danticat requests acknowledgement for these historical traumas and its victims, the latter perspective centers the self-empowerment and personal growth of the colonized people in spite of their conditions (846). In this manner, postcolonial-trauma novels differentiate themselves from the classic trauma theories, as they “reverse trauma theory’s assumptions, … by depicting victims’ resilience, resistance, and eventual triumph over trauma” (Visser 127). Therefore, by integrating various perspectives into

the structure of the narrative, the novel does not only draw attention to the articulation of colonial traumas, in which it also insists upon its recognition, but it also emphasizes the healing and overcoming of these traumas.

Additionally, Kennedy explores black female subjectivity and the legacies of colonial trauma by expanding Frantz Fanon's theory in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon analyzed the psychological conditions of black subjectivity under colonialism and argued that "white civilization and European culture have exposed an existential deviation on the black man" (6). In other words, he points out that black subjectivity is inherently "constituted by otherness and … by the traumas of colonialism", because colonialism prevents colonized people from developing an independent sense of identity (Kennedy 89). For instance, Fanon exemplifies how African boys constantly learn in school to identify themselves with the white man, which means that they gradually internalize the Western-European attitude and lose their ability to not see themselves through the eyes of the other, essentially losing their own subjectivity (Fanon 114-115; Kennedy 95). In her article, Kennedy develops Fanon's critical analysis by applying it to African women in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *The Book of Not* (2006). Firstly, like Martínez-Falquina's analysis, Kennedy noticed how Dangarembga uses rhetoric and figurative language to dramatize the daily conditions of racism in order to articulate the trauma of colonialism in Zimbabwe (Kennedy 87). She argues that the insidious trauma from the colonial education system caused Tambu, Dangarembga's protagonist, to become an object: this is a novel of "'unbecoming'–of the loss of identity, feeling, and attachments" (89). Secondly, Kennedy emphasizes the different dimensions of speech in Dangarembga's protagonist and how they assimilate over time. Like Fanon, she indicates that speech is an important sign to which one can 'measure' the cultural assimilation of colonized people, since distinct ethnicities use different forms of syntax and

morphology, and when Tambu speaks the colonizer's language, she supports the weight of that civilization (92). Lastly, to emphasize the complexity of subjectivity during the time of colonialism, Kennedy indicates how Dangarembga avoids simplistic black and white depictions or oppositions between the victims and perpetrators (104). Instead, all characters are flawed or compromised, and creating connections within black communities appears not easier than making them with white people (104). Thus, by researching black female subjectivity in *The Book of Not*, Kennedy unveiled that insidious trauma caused by colonialism can be represented in various ways, for instance, in the rhetoric, its figurative language and in the creation of complex characters.

In addition to the (postcolonial) trauma theories, I will now delineate the theories relating to racial identity. After explaining the notions towards racial identity, I will present W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness and Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry. Even though both theories center their research on the experiences of men of color, and to some extent overlook the experiences of women of color, I will take into account how they might deviate from these theories by including Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw's concept reveals that certain aspects, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation, intersect with each other and create a unique situation of experiences (Crenshaw 1244). According to Crenshaw, these experiences cannot be correctly understood if it is not recognized how these multiple categories intersect with each other (1243-1244).

Like the intersections in Crenshaw's theory, identity is nowadays seen as something fluid. For instance, Stuart Hall asserts that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (225). In his opinion, identities already exist through history, but they can transcend time, histories and cultures, as they are always in the process of becoming (222; 225). In this

sense, they are also something of the future, as they continually transform (225). Hall's perceptions of identity challenge former notions of racial identity, as it was thought that one's identity constituted of '"one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves'" based on the history and culture of that person (223). These essential identities were also inherently linked to skin color. According to Teresa Hubel and Neil Brooks, this is because differences in skin color remain to be associated with a "metaphysics of substance" (47). In other words, according to essentialism, the unchangeable quality of someone's skin color determines a person's identity. Over time, these essentialist notions established a hierarchal system, which privileged whiteness, and taught children that social relations and the "distribution of power and resources" are related to one's racial identity (Mahalingam 302).

Du Bois's concept of double consciousness can be seen as an exemplar of how people of color are psychologically affected by this racial hierarchy. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois questions the effects of racial segregation in the United States (Gooding-Williams 3). He argues that African Americans have internalized a "second-sight" in which they came to view themselves through the eyes of white Americans:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (922)

In this passage, Du Bois emphasizes that as a result of the legal segregation of black and white Americans, African Americans have divided their African self from their American identity (Du Bois 922, Stocks 86). In this sense, African Americans are psychologically in a conflicted state of mind, since they can either see themselves as African or American, but not as both. Subsequently, Du Bois indicates that the internalization of this double consciousness causes an imbalance of the mental state, as the "facing of so vast a prejudice … bring[s] the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression" (925). In this manner, Du Bois argues that racial degradation of black Americans divides and disturbs the identities of African Americans.

While Du Bois's concept of double consciousness focuses on the conflicting inner division of African American identities, Bhabha's theory of mimicry concentrates on the ambivalent relation between the colonizer and the colonized. In his theory, Bhabha argues that colonized people, on the one hand, mimic certain attitudes from the colonizer, because they have internalized the notion that their culture is inferior to that of the colonizer (Godiwala 61). On the other hand, in the act of mimicking the colonizer, they can also mock the authority of the colonizer and pose a threat to the "normalized knowledges" of the host culture (Bhabha 86). Indeed, in copying the norms of the colonizing culture, the colonized subject becomes familiar for the colonizer and yet, is not quite the same (86). This difference is essential, because it allows the colonized to question the norms of the colonizer and recognize their flaws. When recognizing this, they can destabilize the hegemonic and cultural relations within its society (Godiwala 62). For instance, Godiwala indicates that after realizing the flaws of the colonizers, there is usually a return to the "traditional or mythological forms of discourse [which] offer resistance to [the] colonial power", such as "the Caribbean slaves' myths [of] Anansi which encouraged acts of

dissidence and revolt; … or [the] complete disavowal of antecedents (Negritude; the Harlem Renaissance)" (65). However, Bhabha points out that it can only destabilize the power if the colonizer is aware that the colonized subject is "not quite white" (86). Thus, rather than a straightforward relation, in which the colonized subject perfectly mimics the colonizer, Bhabha reveals that the relationship is rather ambivalent.

However, Godiwala notes that it is important to indicate the difference between the performative mimicry and the mimicry in which one thoroughly integrates the hegemonic structures of the colonizer. In her article, she argues that the colonized can either mock and question the dominant structures of Western colonialism, or internalize the values and beliefs so thoroughly that the colonized subject rather repeats the hegemonic structures of colonial discourse (62-63). In this way, the colonized person preserves the hierarchies of Western power (63). This is plausible, as the person mimicking internalizes these values insidiously in an unconscious manner. In regard to the latter meaning, Godiwala argues that mimicry has become dangerous, since the racist ideologies become now imbedded in the attitudes of the colonized who repeat that same attitude towards the same non-white people they represent (66). Therefore, one should differentiate this hazardous mimicking from the performative act of mimicry. By performative mimicry, Godiwala means the impersonation of the "speech utterance and non-verbal cultural codes" (66). In being able to mimic these codes, she argues that the colonized subject only emphasizes the ability to understand and adopt the complexities of the colonizer's cultural codes, rather than implying an "underlying adherence to [the] colonial ideologies" (66). The act of mimicking then becomes a skill one can effectively use to mock and question the hegemonic structures of the colonizer. Thus, in mimicking the attitude of the colonizer, one can either reinscribe the Western power or mock its power.

Chapter 2: The Parody of Racial Passing in Larsen's *Passing*

Nella Larsen's *Passing* is a novel which transgresses the color line in multiple ways. In the novel, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry cross the line from black to white by racial passing. It also depicts the privileges people gain from whiteness, as it is only through passing that people can bypass their caste. Additionally, *Passing* indicates the psychological difficulties and consequences that result from passing. By highlighting these aspects, the trope of passing becomes much more than just the central activity in the novel, and reveals the effects of the ongoing racism in the American caste system. To be more specific, there is a difference between the act of passing in the novel, in which someone actually impersonates a white person, and the trope of passing, which includes the metaphorical meanings and intention of passing as well. Furthermore, *Passing* challenges the perceptions of the color line by questioning the idea of having a racial identity. Through the trope of passing, the novel repudiates the notion of essentialism, on which the racial caste system is founded. Allyson Hobbs points out that the act of passing created the opportunity to interrogate race and examine the act of denying race (8). When individuals decided to pass for white, they often changed their racial identity by adjusting their speech, clothing and life story (8). Frequently, individuals were also perceived and accepted to be part of a certain category based on their physical appearance and their environment. In this manner, passing confirms that an individual's qualities do not determine their identity and show that race is a social construct (14). Like the act of passing, the discourse about racial passing questions identity and race. Therefore, this chapter will argue that Larsen's *Passing* simultaneously represents the effects of ongoing racism in the American caste system and undermines essentialist perceptions of racial identity.

2.1 The Internalization of Ongoing Racism in Larsen's Passing

It is difficult to specify the exact microaggressions which caused Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry's trauma, and in turn their decision to racially pass. This is a result of Irene's (un)conscious repression of the topic of race. Larsen's novel is written from a limited omniscient point of view in which Irene's perspective is focalized. This choice in narrative perspective emphasizes how Irene cannot express her trauma. According to Mieke Bal, traumatic memories resist integration into consciousness and, as a result, the survivor does not have access to these memories, since "they remain 'outside' the subject" (iix). She argues that this in turn causes the repression of memories and, in narratological terms, the ellipsis of elements (ix). This repression and ellipsis return in *Passing*. For instance, Irene's decision to pass for white is racial repression, as she rejects to be fully identified with African Americans. According to Doreen Fowler, this is the reason why the topic of "race scarcely appears" in the novel (Fowler). Throughout the novel, the topic of race is hidden in the margins of the narrative. For instance, Fowler notes that even the words "black" or "Negro" seldomly appear in the text (Fowler). In addition, when Irene visits the Drayton hotel in Chicago, she does not mention once that she is racially passing. It is only when Clare Kendry spots Irene, and confronts Irene with her decision to pass, that it is revealed that she is visiting an all-white hotel. In this sense, the ellipsis alters the significance of the passage retrospectively, as the reader only finds out later that she was concealing her racial identity for fear of "being ejected" from the hotel (Larsen 11). Furthermore, every time when Irene's husband starts talking about the topic of race to their sons, Irene interrupts him and silences him as well: "Just the same [Brian], you're not to talk to them about the race problem, I won't have it" (103). In this sense, Irene (un)consciously refuses to talk about race, which causes the narrative to be frequently interrupted through ellipsis. A last example of this fragmentation is

given at the end of the novel. After Irene supposedly pushes Clare through the window, there are no details given, and the narrator mentions that: “Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly” (111). In this manner, Irene’s repression of this traumatic event results in the ellipsis of Clare’s fall through the window.

Similarly to racial passing, Irene represses her sexual attraction to Clare Kendry and passes for straight. Whereas the majority of members of the LGBTQIA+ community could pass for straight, and are still often assumed to be straight unless explicitly announced, most African Americans cannot pass for white (Blackmer 55). However, according to Corrine Blackmer, homosexual people still occupy a similar position to that held by a minority of African Americans who could pass for white, as they can both hide their supposed inferiority (55). Additionally, Blackmer indicates that when Larsen was writing the novel, both homosexuality and blackness caused a person to be degraded by society (55). In the novel, Irene passes for straight, since she represses her sexual attraction to Clare in order to prevent losing her relatively high position in the social hierarchy. In the beginning of the novel, Irene already seems attracted to Clare. When meeting Clare at the Drayton hotel, Irene depicts her as “an attractive-looking woman” (Larsen 9). Furthermore, when they meet again two years later, Clare greets Irene by “dropp[ing] a kiss of her dark curls”, and in response, Irene “had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” and says: “Dear God! But aren’t you lovely, Clare!” (62). In reaction to this, Clare makes a joke about checking the mail at the post office to which Irene consciously did not send any letters: “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” (62). From these passages, it becomes clear that Irene is attracted to Clare and that the novel is filled with homo-erotic undertones, which is particularly exemplified by Clare’s joke.

David Blackmore noticed this as well and adds that Irene's portrayals of Clare are often "exotic" or "sensual", which expresses Irene's desire for Clare (476). For example, when Clare sits in the opposite chair, facing Irene, she describes Clare's facial features in a sensuous manner:

> Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft lustre. And the eyes were magnificent! … They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic. Yes, Clare Kendry's loveliness was absolute, beyond challenge[.] (Larsen 24)

This example draws attention to how Irene is almost entranced by Clare's physical presence. In fact, she is so attracted to Clare's appearance that it even causes her to have "the sense of being petted and caressed" (24). However, even though these examples show how Irene is sexually attracted to Clare, she never mentions this, nor the topic of homosexuality explicitly mentioned in the text, which emphasizes that she cannot express Irene feelings. Instead, she represses them in order to prevent losing the life she had before Clare: "Above everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life" (100). In this sense, Irene decides to pass for straight, as she does not want to lose her high position in society.

In addition to Irene's repression, her internalization of white supremacy ideals is also an expression of trauma. In Du Bois's double consciousness theory, he points out that African Americans have internalized a "second-sight" in which they can only view themselves through the perspective of the white Americans (922). Similarly, Irene has internalized white values and, as a result, views herself and others through the perspective of white Americans. For instance, Irene's frequent act of passing and her wish that "she had not been born a Negro" emphasizes

how she desperately wants to get rid of "the burden of race" (Larsen 97). She mentions that it is already enough "to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well" (97). Moreover, when passing in the Drayton hotel, Irene concludes that Clare's smile is being "just a shade too provocative for a waiter" (9). Even though she is black herself, she determines that Clare's smile is "too provocative" and against the standards of behavior between a white lady and a black waiter (9). Furthermore, in a conversation with Hugh Wentworth at the Negro Welfare League dance, she expresses that she finds dark-skinned African Americans exotic and "something strange, … something so different that it's really at the opposite end of the pole from all … [the] accustomed notions of beauty" (73). By mentioning that she finds darker-skinned African Americans "exotic" and "strange", she implies that they do not adhere to her "accustomed notions of beauty" (73). Moreover, it implies that she follows the white beauty standards, and finds these standards more beautiful, which indicates that she internalized white beliefs of what beauty entails. Besides, Irene's internalization is also reflected in the morphology and punctuation of the novel:

> She was caught between two alliances, different, yet, the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or it might be, all three. (96)

By specifically mentioning "herself, *or* the race" (emphasis added), Larsen signifies that Irene distances herself from her race and does not see her African heritage as being part of her identity (96). Likewise, by placing a full stop in between herself and her race, it is again indicated that Irene separates herself from her racial identity. In this manner, Larsen draws attention to Irene's conflicted state of mind, which results from the racism in the United States.

Furthermore, Irene's internalization of white beliefs and standards is emphasized through her use of language, as she mimics the language use of the white upper class. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Frantz Fanon argues that speech indicates how a person has assimilated to another culture, as different ethnicities have distinct forms of syntax and morphology (92). These distinct forms of accents return in *Passing*, since Irene only speaks general American. Throughout the novel, Irene does not speak once with an African American accent. For instance, a typical feature of African American English is the reductions of the copula verb (Thomas 455). Yet, Irene always uses either a copula verb or a modal verb. Moreover, she even uses (semi)modal verbs which are far more commonly used in British English than in American English. For example, the word 'ought to' in the sentence: "I can't help thinking that you ought not to come up here, ought not to run the risk of knowing Negroes" (Larsen 62). This contrasts with Clare and Brian's use of language, who both still frequently speak in this accent. For instance, Clare does not pronounce the copula verb when telling Irene that passing is relatively easy: "If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve" (Larsen 20). Likewise, Brian also deletes the copula verb: "Uplifting the brother's no easy job", and he does this again when he asks questions: "D'you mean that you think Clare is stupid?" (53;86). In addition, Irene uses vocabulary which are most commonly used by the upper class, for instance, she uses more decorative words, such as "lovely" and "marvelous" to indicate that something is pleasant (9;86). Moreover, she does not use any abbreviations, such as 'invite', instead she always uses the formal variant "invitation" (77). Instead of choosing the words 'couch', 'excuse me', and 'perfume', Irene prefers the classier synonyms "sofa", "pardon", and uses "a scented woman" to indicate that a woman is wearing perfume (3;98;4). In this sense, Irene syntactically and morphologically speaks with an upper-class accent.

Moreover, Irene also mimics the class and color division of the dominant society through the monoracial relationships with her servants. This hierarchal relationship again emphasizes how Irene has internalized the notions of white supremacy. In *Passing*, Irene has a distanced relationship with her maids: Zulena and Sadie. Mary Wilson comments that her relationship with her servants is similar to the relation between "the 'black servant' cleaning up after her 'white' mistress", as she embodies multiple "stereotypical upper-class values", which are implicitly seen as white (984; 1005). For instance, she prioritizes her role in the domestic sphere and follows the norms of the assigned gender roles: "I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I *am* wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house" (Larsen 78). In her article, Wilson shows that there is a difference between the black bourgeoisie, who are "uplifted" by the "clean up" work of the African Americans from the working-class (982). This relation is reflected in Larsen's novel, as Zulena always cleans up after Irene. Besides, Irene and Zulena's relationship is also reflected in the narrative. Like in Irene's mind, Zulena is intentionally positioned in the margins of *Passing*. Throughout the novel, Irene only mentions her when giving her a command. Additionally, Zulena is solely noted in the background depictions, working on her chores in the household. For instance, when Brian and Irene are having breakfast:

> They went into the dining room. … she sat down behind the fat-bellied German coffee-pot, which sent out its morning fragrance, mingled with the smell of crisp toast and savoury bacon, in the distance. … he picked up the morning paper from his own chair and sat down. Zulena, a small mahogany-colored *creature*, brought in the grapefruit. They took up their spoons. (Larsen 51, emphasis added)

This passage shows how Zulena is barely noticed by the narrator, nor by Brian and Irene. In this manner, she only takes up a liminal space in the novel and becomes an additional object for the

narrator to describe during the morning routine. Moreover, in specifically calling her a "creature", she is objectified (51). This objectivity is legitimized by Irene, since Zulena and Irene belong to the same racial category (Wilson 982).

Similar to Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry psychologically suffers from her decision to pass, and represses her racial identity. In *Passing*, Clare mostly passes for the material wealth she gains by it. According to Allyson Hobbs, a white identity conferred many benefits, such as economic, social and political entitlements (11). Clare grew up in a lower social class than Irene, since it is mentioned that her father was a janitor and her aunts were "as poor as church mice" (Larsen 21). The hard work which she had to do for her aunts sparked her determination her to become wealthy: "I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass'" (22). However, in deciding to pass for white, she represses a part of her identity and isolates herself from the African American community. In a letter to Irene, she mentions that she regretted her decision:

> For I am lonely, so lonely … cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life … You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of … It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases[.] (Larsen 5)

This letter draws attention to how Clare is isolated and lonely. Additionally, it points out how she psychologically suffers and is torn between two worlds, where she does not completely fit in either anymore. The fact that she does not belong fully in either world is also made concrete through the nickname Clare's husband gives her, since he calls her "Nig" (34). This nickname is

abbreviated and by specifically nicknaming her “Nig” instead of “nigger”, it is emphasized that Clare has become only half black, which stresses a gap in her identity (34-35). Moreover, it signifies how she is alienated from the African American community. This idea is again materialized in Clare’s death. At the end of the novel, Clare fatally falls out of a window because of the strongly suggested push by Irene. Clare’s death is problematic, since it indicates that there is no place for her in society. To be more specific, Clare is pushed by Irene because she wanted to permanently return to Harlem and give up the act of passing. As mentioned in this paragraph, Clare often indicates that she suffers from her act of passing and in a conversation with Irene, she notes that if her husband would find out, she could return: “I’d do what I want to do more than anything else right now. I’d come up her to live. Harlem, I mean. … [I]f Jack finds out, if our marriage is broken, that lets me out. Doesn’t it?” (96). This frightens Irene and motivates her to push Clare, because when John Bellew discovers Clare’s identity, “[Irene] couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (111). In this manner, Clare’s death reiterates how there is no place for her in the black community nor in white society.

2.2 Subverting the Ideas of the Passing Plot and the Tragic Mulatto Myth

As a result of Irene’s unconscious internalization, her act of passing reinforces the hierarchy in the caste system. Larsen’s novel indicates that Irene’s act of passing has caused her to repeat the racist attitudes towards the same people she represents. As mentioned in the previous section, Irene objectifies her black maid Zulena and judges other African Americans by white standards. For instance, when meeting Clare for the first time in the Drayton hotel, and when she judges

darker-skinned African Americans on the ideals of white beauty. In this manner, even though Irene claims to be passing "for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that", she has actually internalized the beliefs of the Jim Crow South and preserves them, which resembles Bhabha's hazardous form of mimicry (98). According to his theory, the dominant values are now internalized so thoroughly in the colonized subject that the person rather repeats the hierarchal structures of colonial discourse (qtd. in Godiwala 62-63). Similarly, Irene reinforces the beliefs and ideals of the white dominant society, which is destructive for herself and others.

Yet, by depicting Irene's thorough internalization, Larsen's novel subverts the passing plot. In *Passing*, the juxtaposition between Irene and Clare calls attention to how racial passing is more a state of mind than an act. Throughout the novel, Irene is juxtaposed with Clare, as they differ from each other in almost every aspect:

> Actually [Irene and Clare] were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness. Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood. In truth, it was higher, broader, and firmer[.] (59)

Yet, the most important aspects in which they differ from each other are the manners in which they racially pass. Firstly, Irene passes only from time to time and is still a part of the black community in Harlem. This contrasts with Clare, who decides to pass forever and severs all ties with the black community. Secondly, even though Irene claims to be passing "for the sake of convenience", she internalizes the white attitudes of America (98). This aspect differs again from Clare, as she has both the ability to adopt the cultural codes of the white society and maintains an underlying adherence to the ideology of the black community. Although Clare does internalize

certain white attitudes such as the negatives perceptions to darker tones of skin, since she mentions: "[b]ut of course, nobody wants a dark child", she also has the ability to denounce these attitudes (Larsen 32). For instance, she dances with both white and black men on the Welfare League dance. Moreover, she freely converses with Irene's maids and does not mind spending time with them: "Clare could very happily amuse herself with Ted and Junior … [o]r, lacking the boys, she would descend to the kitchen and … spend her visit in talk and merriment with Zulena and Sadie (76). In this manner, Clare's passing turns out to be mostly performative for the gain of white privileges. Lastly, Clare's passing also mocks the authority of white society. While externally passing for white, but internally still conforming to the values of the black community, she undermines the caste system. For example, in showing her respect towards African Americans, even if they have a lower status than her, Clare alters the normalized race relations in the United States. This differs from Irene's passing as well, as she preserves the hierarchal structures of the American caste system. This juxtaposition between Irene and Clare's passing subverts the passing plot in the novel, since it turns out that racial passing is much more a state of mind than the actual act of passing. In other words, while the reader initially thinks that the novel is about Clare's physical passing, it turns out that the novel explores Irene's psychological passing, as she is the one who thoroughly coheres to the beliefs of the white dominant society. Even though she lives in Harlem and is committed to advancing the black equality in the United States, internally Irene is the one who actually passes, and to whom the title of the novel refers. In this way, the novel subverts the meaning of passing.

In addition, Larsen's *Passing* deviates from the conventions of the myth of the tragic mulatto. In many depictions of the tragic mulatto, a biracial woman suffers from the tragedy of her "racial liminality", as she is alienated from the black community and white society (Clark

260). The myth frequently draws attention to her sexual corruption to white men, her depression and self-hatred, the contempt she feels towards herself and other African Americans, and the inevitable suicide (attempt) at the end (260; 263). Additionally, Emily Clark points out that if a mulatto could pass for white, the act would lead to more self-loathing (260). Initially, it seems that the novel evokes the plot of tragic mulatto through both Irene and Clare. For instance, it looks like Clare uses her appearance to marry a white man, suffers from depression and isolation resulting from passing, and tragically dies at the end of the novel. However, the novel deviates from this myth by creating psychologically complicated and ambiguous characters. Unlike the simplistic and stereotypical characteristics of the tragic mulatto, Larsen's protagonists are "atypical" in their depiction (Wall 97). Irene and Clare both deviate from most other African Americans in their appearance, their social class, their sexual orientation, and values and attitudes towards society. For instance, as previously mentioned, Irene is sexually attracted to Clare and fantasizes about her like an "exotic female other" (Wall 98). However, Irene has also negative feelings towards Clare, such as hatred, jealousy and repulsion. When Irene, for example, is meeting Gertrude and Clare for tea, Clare asks Irene a question about the skin color of her two sons. In reaction to this question Irene started to "strugg[le] with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger, and contempt" (Larsen 32). Moreover, Irene is angry and annoyed at Clare when she just shows up to Irene's house before the welfare dance: "She was angry with herself and with Clare, … [s]he was annoyed too, because she was aware that [Clare] would involve her in numerous petty inconveniences and evasions" (70). In addition, even though Clare married John Bellew, she might also be a bisexual or a lesbian, because she is in fact the one who makes the jokes with homo-erotic undertones, and always initiates the physical contact between her and Irene. For instance, she greets Irene every time with a "kiss", while Irene is more hesitant in her

greetings (28).

Besides, it is clearly suggested that Clare's death is no suicide, which deviates from the mulatto myth as well. At the end of the novel, it is unclear whether Irene or John pushed her through the window at the Freelander's party – note the irony of the name – or if she tragically fell through the window. However, during the party, it is strongly implied that Irene pushes her through the open window:

> Clare stood at the window … she seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes. It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free. … what happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there … the next she was gone[.] (111)

From this example, it becomes clear that Irene had both the opportunity and the motivation to shove Clare through the window. Additionally, it is multiple times foreshadowed that Irene wants Clare gone. For instance, when Irene imagines that Clare and Brian have a sexual relationship, she becomes so enraged that she drops a teacup on the ground. In this instance, she implies to Hugh that she knows a way to get rid of unwanted things:

> [The cup] was the ugliest thing that your ancestors, the charming Confederates ever owned [and] … I've never figured out a way of getting rid of it until about five minutes ago. I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it forever. So simple! And I'd never thought of it before[.] (93)

The cup symbolizes Clare, as both the cup and Clare are seen as unwanted by Irene, and both eventually ‘die’ through a fatal fall. In this manner, the event itself and the foreshadowing suggest that Irene pushed Clare, instead of her Clare committing suicide. Moreover, as stated before, the reason why Irene might have pushed Clare differs from the mulatto myth depictions as well. Instead, of being punished for passing for white, Clare is pushed through the window for her longing to return to Harlem and the black community. Therefore, the ending of the novel deviates from the stereotypical depictions of the mulatto myth.

2.3 Conclusion to Larsen’s Passing

Passing emphasizes the traumas of ongoing racism through the trope of passing. Even though Irene Redfield mostly represses her trauma of ongoing racism, exemplified in the frequent ellipsis of elements, the fact that she passes for white and for straight is an expression of her trauma. Another expression of Irene’s trauma is her internalization of the ideas of white supremacy. For instance, Irene not only mimics the language use of the upper class, but she also imitates the distanced relation between herself and her maids. From these examples, it turns out that Irene views herself and others through the perspective of white Americans. Furthermore, *Passing* emphasizes that passing can be a state of mind. Even though Clare is the character who constantly passes in the novel, Irene is the one who psychologically internalizes the attitudes and beliefs of the white dominant society. In this manner, she is the one who actually passes for white. In this way, the novel also creates a distinction between the performative act of passing, which undermines the caste system, and the act of thoroughly passing which is destructive for

Irene's sense of self and others. Lastly, the novel deviates from the stereotypical depictions of the tragic mulatto myth. Instead of creating flat characters, *Passing* has psychologically complicated and ambiguous characters. Besides, even though Clare passes away, her death differs from the typical suicide trope which occurs in the tragic mulatto myth. Therefore, the text subverts both the passing plot and the myth of the tragic mulatto.

As a result of discussing these two themes, *Passing* addresses themes which challenge the caste system in America. For instance, the trope of passing for white and for straight explicitly questions the ideas of essentialism. This idea is also explicitly noted in the novel. For instance, when Clare spots Irene at the Drayton hotel, Irene mentions that it is impossible to determine whether Irene is African American or not: "Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot" (11). This passage directly points out how it is impossible to determine someone's racial identity based on their outward appearance. Instead, this example emphasizes how white people categorize people's racial identity based on stereotypical characteristics. This idea is again reiterated by Irene in a conversation between her and Hugh. When Hugh asks whether Clare is actually white, Irene answers: "Oh, Hugh! You're so clever. You actually know everything. Even how to tell the sheep from the goats" (74). The expression to "tell the sheep from the goats" originates from the Bible and symbolizes how God knew how to separate the righteous from the sinful (Larsen 74; BibleGateway; Matthew 25:31-46). Yet, Irene uses this expression to indicate the difference between white and black people. After this response, Irene adds that in reality nobody can determine one's identity just by looking, because racial identities are not a "tangible" idea: "'Well, don't let that worry you. Nobody can. Not by looking.' … 'I'm afraid I

can’t explain. Not clearly. There are ways. But they’re not definite or tangible’” (Larsen 74). Thus, in both addressing the themes of passing for white and for straight, and in explicitly reiterating that an individual’s physical qualities do not determine their identity, *Passing* questions the ideas of essentialism.

Chapter 3: White Ideals of Beauty in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the white beauty standards in American society are examined. Morrison centers her novel on Pecola Breedlove, an African American girl who is continually discriminated because of her physical appearance, in particular her darker skin tone. In the foreword, Morrison explains that the project of this novel was her effort "to peck away at the gaze that condemned [Pecola]" (xi). By 'the gaze', she specifically refers to the white beauty standards ingrained in American society. Morrison's novel calls attention to how physical beauty in the United States is often entwined with whiteness, while ugliness is associated with blackness. This is indicated by contrasting Pecola with the epitome of white beauty, Shirley Temple. By contrasting these beauty ideals through the two girls, the novel centers how daily microaggressions can pile up over time and lead to the internalization of feelings of racial inferiority. In this manner, *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes that this internalization has devastating consequences for society and one's identity. In order to draw attention to these ideas, the novel shifts the narrative voice multiple times, and creates fragmentation and realistic characters. However, it also dramatizes the microaggressions against Pecola, and emphasizes how divisions in class, gender and race intersect with each other and can reinforce existent biases. In doing this, Morrison's novel not only expands the visibility for African American women, but also reiterates that racism is a societal problem. This chapter will argue that Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* both prioritizes the perspective of African American woman, and questions white dominant ideologies from within society.

3.1. The Internalization of Destructive Beauty Standards in Pecola Breedlove

As a result of Pecola's darker skin tone, she is regularly discriminated by numerous people in her village, which becomes visible through the shifting narrative voice in the novel. *The Bluest Eye*, presents Pecola's trauma from ongoing racism by shifting the narrative voice, which leads to the dramatization of the microaggressions. Even though the narrative is mostly written from the perspective of Claudia MacTeer, the perspective is shifted multiple times throughout the novel. In this manner, the novel draws attention to what other people think of Pecola and how they act towards her. The first instance in which the reader views the discrimination is when the omniscient narrator shows how Pecola is ignored and despised at school by her teachers and classmates:

> Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. … Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond. (Morrison 45-46)

This passage specifically emphasizes how her teachers and peers bully Pecola for her physical appearance, and try to ignore her existence by not even glancing at her. Only two pages after this passage, a new chapter starts in which the narrative voice shifts and focalizes Mr. Yacobowski's perspective, the storeowner of the local candy shop. In this chapter, it is emphasized how Mr. Yacobowski also does not want to recognize Pecola when she comes in his store to buy some candy: "[a]t some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (48). By constantly shifting the narrative voice, the novel reiterates the ongoing discrimination against Pecola, and it eventually shows how the people of Pecola's village, her teachers, peers, and even her parents

single Pecola out for her appearance. Furthermore, in its reiteration, the novel reflects on how daily microaggressions accumulate over time and eventually cause trauma. Therefore, the repetition ensures the visibility of Pecola's trauma resulting from the daily racism.

Moreover, Pecola views herself through the eyes of white Americans, as she has internalized the white perceptions of beauty. This parallels the "second-sight" of Du Bois's double consciousness theory, in which black people only see themselves through the perspectives of white people (922). In the novel, beauty is connected to whiteness and particularly with having blue eyes and blond hair, as is exemplified through the white dolls: "[a]dults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child desired" (Morrison 20). Pecola internalizes this perception of beauty as well, because she desperately wants to have blue eyes. For Pecola, blue eyes "held the pictures, and knew the sights", since the blue eyes both signify the epitome of beauty in the novel, and are the means through which Pecola sees the world (46). She thinks that by changing her eye color to blue, "she herself would be [perceived] different[ly]" by both herself and the world around her (46). In this sense, the symbol of the eyes already signifies that Pecola views the world from a white gaze. Additionally, this internalization of Pecola is clearly depicted when she tries to eat the candy with a Mary Jane wrapper in order to transform the color of her eyes to blue:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling with white face. Blond hair in disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (50)

By emphasizing that to eat the eyes is to become like Mary Jane, it turns out that Pecola does not eat the candy for its taste. Instead, she eats the candy for the gratification that her eyes might turn blue by eating them, which Pecola views as something positive. In this sense, Pecola internalizes the destructive white gaze and beauty standards. Similarly, this symbolization is again shown when Pecola drinks "*three* quarts of milk" from the special Shirley Temple cup in order to absorb the whiteness of the milk and the features of Shirley Temple: "[Pecola] was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (23). Like the Mary Jane candy, Pecola drinks the milk from the cup, with Shirley embodying the epitome of beauty, because Pecola wishes to become lighter skinned by drinking it. Pecola views this as extremely desirable, since she drinks "*three* quarts" of it (23). In this way, it is again emphasized that Pecola wants to 'absorb' whiteness, which signifies that she views herself through the gaze of white people, since she wants to be able to adhere to their beauty standards.

An additional signifier of Pecola's internalization is her silence throughout the novel, which indicates her loss of identity and subjectivity. As mentioned in the first chapter, trauma resists representation as a result of the shock during the traumatic experience in which the memories cannot be integrated into consciousness (Luckhurst 79). Subsequently, a person who experiences a trauma often becomes silent. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison also reflects Pecola's silence and she mentions in the foreword that she knew "that some victims of powerful self-loathing … surrender their identity; melt into a structure that delivers the strong persona they lack. … [and there are some] who collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it" (ix-x). This is exactly what happens to Pecola, since her voice is almost always silent throughout the novel, as a result of the microaggressions she faces daily. The reader mostly

learns about these microaggressions through the focalization of Claudia Macteer and from the omniscient narrator. For instance, it is through Claudia's narration that the reader discovers that Pecola is bullied for her physical appearance on the playground by a group of black boys. Additionally, the omniscient narrator reveals how Pecola is scorned by Geraldine, as she immediately judges Pecola on her darker skin. In this way, Pecola's thoughts are mostly filtered through someone, with the only exception being Pecola's unmediated conversation with her imaginary friend. Yet, most of the other protagonists do have their own perspective shown. When the novel discusses the backgrounds of Pecola's parents, for instance, it is written from a limited omniscient narration, focalizing Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, and it includes first-person narration through the form of letters. In addition, even the perspective of Soaphead Church, the interpreter of dreams who helps Pecola believe that she actually has blue eyes, is presented by the narrator through the inclusion of his letter to God. Morrison also comments on this stylistic choice, as she says that the invention of multiple narrative perspectives was specifically to fill in the "narrative void" of Pecola (x). In this way, her narrative strategy reflects Pecola's silence and emphasizes her position as an object.

Moreover, Pecola's silence also signifies her loss of identity. Paul Douglas Mahaffey argues that *The Bluest Eye* contrasts the genre of the Bildungsroman, and can be classified as an "anti-coming of age novel" (162). He points out that Morrison's strategy is to break away from the idea of "a young character experiencing a symbolic journey or a series of adventures in order to gain a better understanding of the adult world" (162). Instead, *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes how a young girl's life is broken by the daily discrimination and violence she experiences in the American caste system. As a result, Pecola actually 'unbecomes' someone in the novel, which Morrison also affirms by noting in the foreword that *The Bluest Eye* "[b]egun as a bleak narrative

of psychological murder" on the main character (x). An example which points out Pecola's 'unbecoming' occurs when she actively tries to makes herself disappear when sitting in front of the mirror:

> 'Please, God,' she whispered into the palm of her hand. 'Please make me disappear.' She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. … Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. … The legs all at once. It was the hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally, it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. (45)

Pecola's wishes her body parts to disappear, because she finds them undesirable. This example clearly indicates how she loathes her own physical appearance as a result of the internalization that her body, and more specifically, her darker skin tone is ugly. The exceptions of the eyes strengthen Pecola's 'unbecoming', because they embody the white perception of beauty, and after Pecola's internalization of this ideology, there is nothing left from herself except for the white gaze. Additionally, similar to Pecola's lack of narrative voice, she does not make her own decisions. Throughout the novel, she always follows another character, instead of undertaking action. For instance, when Maureen Peal invites Pecola to eat ice cream with her, Pecola does not answer her at first, as she just "[s]miled but did not look at Maureen" (68). Only when Maureen showed her the money, did Pecola agree to follow her to the ice cream place. Once they got their ice creams, she asks Pecola many questions to which Pecola only answers in the affirmative to please Maureen. In this situation, Maureen is the subject who takes the decisions for Pecola and moves Pecola through the scene. In this manner, she is almost like a silenced object who has no individual opinion.

In addition, Claudia is contrasted with Pecola, which emphasizes again Pecola's internalization of the white perceptions of beauty. While Pecola internalizes the white beauty standards, Claudia questions them. For instance, when Claudia gets a doll for Christmas, she dislikes the doll and its physical features: "I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair. The … dolls, which were supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite. … I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made" (20). Instead of playing with the doll, Claudia rather dissects the doll limb by limb and "examine[s] it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (21). By carrying out this inspection, Mahaffey argues that she questions "the artificiality" in the social race, and gender constructs (163). Furthermore, Claudia actively challenges the white beauty standards. Like the dolls, Claudia examines the white beauty standards embodied in Maureen Peal in order to look "for flaws to restore [her] equilibrium" (63). For example, Claudia and Frieda, her older sister, change Maureen's name into "Meringue Pie" and discover that she had actually a "dog tooth" and was "born with six fingers on each hand" (63). As a result of these examinations, they end up calling her "Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" (63). Mahaffey notes that in insulting her, Claudia and Frieda both recognize that whiteness has its flaws, and critique the white ideals of beauty (159). However, while Claudia can critique the white perceptions of beauty, Pecola cannot recognize these imperfections. This is exemplified when Maureen insults Pecola, Claudia and Frieda on the playground. While Claudia and Frieda actively start to insult her back, Pecola "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (73). This example emphasizes the contrasts between the two girls. While Claudia has enough self-esteem to insult Maureen, which indicates that she recognizes that white people have flaws, Pecola is immediately intimidated by the insults, and does not question Maureen's scorns.

In this manner, it is the contrast between Claudia and Pecola that draws attention to Pecola's submissiveness.

While the rape scene is of course a key moment in the novel, it should not be overlooked how the every-day discrimination towards Pecola Breedlove has destructive consequences as well. As previously shown, the novel actually centers the idea that the beauty standards are devastating, and it is even mentioned that physical beauty is "probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (122). Furthermore, in the foreword to the novel Morrison mentions: "I had seen the pretty, the lovely, the nice, the ugly, and although I had certainly used the word 'beautiful,' I had never experienced its shock – the force of which was equaled by the knowledge that no one recognized it" (x). By emphasizing the impact of the microaggressions towards Pecola, Morrison's novel indicates that they are actually the main factor causing "the madness" in Pecola (204). Besides, when adult Claudia reflects upon the past events causing Pecola's madness, she particularly mentions Pecola's internalization of white beauty standards: "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her" (205). By emphasizing Pecola's internalization, Claudia implies that this is the main cause of Pecola's mental disorder. Moreover, by specifically stressing the word "we" multiple times, she points out that society as a whole is to blame for Pecola's madness and not just Cholly Breedlove. In this sense, the rape is more like the last blow, as then "the damage done was total" (204).

3.2 White Beauty Ideals in American Society

As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, the numerous perspectives have multiple functions in the novel, such as dramatizing the microaggressions against Pecola and drawing attention to her silence. They also show that these beauty ideals are ingrained within society. In addition to Pecola's internalization, most African American women have internalized these ideals. For instance, Pauline Breedlove absorbs them after she watches her first film in the movie theater: "[a]long with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty. … In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap" (Morrison 122). Moreover, she internalizes them as she "never was able, after her education in the movies, to look at the face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was absorbed in full from the silver screen" (122). Through this example of Pauline, the novel indicates how dominant perceptions of beauty are mediated through movies and rank people "in the scale of absolute beauty" (122). Furthermore, the text indicates how this internalization has destructive effects on many people within society who cannot cohere to these ideals. For instance, Pauline admits that after watching a movie "it made coming home hard", as she is confronted with the realities of her life (123).

In addition, these ideals are reiterated in Geraldine's chapter to emphasize how many black women from "Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta [and] [f]rom Meridan", migrated to Northern cities and assimilated to the dominant culture in the North as well (81). The novel shows that they have internalized these ideals, because they try "to get rid of the funkiness" (83), which symbolizes the typical features associated with blackness:

> They wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with

> Jergens Lotion. …Whenever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; … [t]hey fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. The hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair. (82-83)

By enumerating the details of how black women adapt their physical features in order to look beautiful, the novel points out how they are constantly judged by society on these features, and it underscores how they have absorbed these ideals. Morrison also comments on this aspect in an interview: "[t]he eye that looked at them was not another Black person's eye. It was a distant White eye that looked at them that they were aspiring to emulate or correct. That was what I thought was sad – not the Southern regions from which they came, but how they absorbed the dominant culture" (Denard 6-7). As a result of emulating these beauty ideals, most African American women lose parts of their identity. Thus, the numerous narrative perspectives underscore the idea that white beauty standards are ingrained within society.

In addition, *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes that what makes this internalization so destructive for society is that these racist perceptions of beauty are now embedded in the beliefs of African Americans, who frequently repeat these ideas to next generation. In the novel, both Pauline and Geraldine have internalized the white perceptions of beauty, and as a result, they transmit them to the next generation. Phyllis Klotman indicates that it is mostly through Pauline that Pecola learns that she is ugly and not loved (124). For instance, it is Pauline who often comments on Pecola's appearance: "I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (Morrison 126). Pauline also creates a distance between them, which signifies the lack of a nurturing relationship, and Pecola has to call her own mother "Mrs. Breedlove" (107). Besides,

Mahaffey notes that as a result of Pauline's internalization, she spends her care, love, and time in her job as a maid for a white family, and rejects Pecola because she reminds Pauline of her own "blackness" (161). In this sense, Pauline rather enforces the racism against Pecola. Furthermore, Geraldine also conveys the white beauty ideals to her son, Louis Junior. As a young woman, Geraldine migrated from the South to the North and she adapts to the white gaze by trying "to get rid of the funkiness" (Morrison 83). When raising her son, she repeats the racist ideology by teaching him how to carefully choose his friends: "His mother did not like him to play with niggers. She explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (87). In teaching her son these differences, she sustains the racial hierarchy in the United States. In this way, Pauline and Geraldine's behavior resembles the behavior of colonized people in Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry. Bhabha discusses that colonized subjects often absorb ideologies of the white dominant culture so thoroughly that they rather strengthen the hierarchal relations (Godiwala 62-63). Likewise, the novel shows that African Americans have internalized the white beauty standards and transmit them to the people they represent. In this sense, it underscores that there is not only racism and violence between black and white communities, but also within black communities, as they become part of the oppression. This idea is again emphasized at the end of the novel through Soaphead Church: "We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white masters' characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain" (177). Thus, through the examples of Pauline, Geraldine and Soaphead Church, the novel exposes that many African Americans rather enforce the racial hierarchy than question it.

The black experience of living in the United States is also juxtaposed with the idyllic Dick and Jane primers, which represents the epitome of the middle-class ideology. The novel starts with the primer of Dick and Jane. Klotman mentions that these primers were common in public schools during the 1940s, the time in which the narrative takes place, and are still familiar for almost every reader (123). They symbolize a typical middle-class family, consisting of "Mother, Father, Dick and Jane", and their dog and cat (Morrison 3). For instance, the mother is "very nice", the father is "big and strong", and everyone smiles a lot and is happy (3). This story is narrated three times in total and every version becomes more chaotic. While the first version is coherently written in full sentences and contains punctuation, the second version has no grammar, nor punctuation. In the third version, the spacing is even left out in between the words, which makes it fragmented and almost unreadable. Klotman argues that every version represents a family in the novel (123). For instance, the first version clearly represents the white Fisher family, and the second version symbolizes the MacTeer family; Claudia and Frieda are poor, but do have parental support and a loving family (Klotman 123). Yet, the third version parallels the Breedlove family, when compared to the MacTeer family and the Fisher family (Mahaffey 158). For example, both Cholly and Pauline Breedlove do not resemble the middle-class ideal of parenthood resembled in the Dick and Jane primer; Cholly is an alcoholic and finds it hard to financially maintain the family, and Pauline is not the beautiful and nurturing stay-at-home mother. In this sense, the novel not only emphasizes how the Breedlove family differs from the other two families, but it also underscores how race, class and gender biases can intersect with each other to create distressing and chaotic living conditions. In this manner, the novel effectively juxtaposes the primers with the narrative of Pecola Breedlove, and shows that the "childhood fable" does not exist in reality for Pecola (Mahaffey 158). Thus, it is exactly the

familiarity of the standard, white, middle-class family, which almost every reader recognizes from elementary school, that demonstrates how black and white living experiences in the United States differ from each other.

3.3 Conclusion to Morrison's The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye effectively shows that whiteness is entwined with the perception of beauty. To draw attention to this argument in the novel, it includes multiple narrative voices, dramatizes the microaggressions, and contrasts Pecola Breedlove with Claudia MacTeer and with the epitomes of the white standard: Shirley Temple. In this manner, the novel emphasizes that these ideals are destructive for black people, since they internalize feelings of racial inferiority, which leads to racial self-loathing. In addition, *The Bluest Eye* points out, through the narrative about Pecola, that microaggressions accumulate over time and subsequently create traumatizing effects. Furthermore, the novel shows that the racial degradation is not only destructive for the person who suffers the ongoing discrimination, since they lose parts of their identity, but it also shows how it is ingrained within society, and is disastrous for society as a whole.

In addition, Morison's novel undermines white dominant ideologies, by focusing on the experiences of an African American girl. Proma Tagore notes that this decision of Morrison is significant, since black women are typically overlooked within dominant discourses as a result of the intersection of race and gender (36). *The Bluest Eye* does emphasize the complex ways in which race, gender, and class divisions influence and reinforce each other. In this sense, it challenges the "singularized modes of identity politics", which discuss either only race or only

gender politics (Tagore 36). Even though Pecola's voice is silenced, by centering her experiences, the novel creates visibility for black women's voices and affirms that they are worthy of representation. Morrison also comments on this in an interview: "my attempt to shape silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worth of the culture" (Morrison xii-xiii). Likewise, in expanding the representation of black women, Morrison's novel diminishes the authority of the white gaze.

Chapter 4: Colorism in Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* centers on how trauma resulting from racial degradation impacts African Americans. For instance, the novel discusses how traumatic experiences can be passed over from generation to generation, or how racial biases and discrimination can lead to racial self-loathing. In particular, it calls attention to the colorism within black communities. Colorism is a form of discrimination in which African Americans with a lighter skin tone are treated more favorably than people with a darker skin tone (NCCJ). This practice preserves the white ideals of beauty and upholds a societal hierarchy based on race (NCCJ). *The Vanishing Half* creates visibility for this form of ongoing trauma by creating the village of Mallard. This is a fictional town in Louisiana in which all citizens are obsessed with having a light complexion. Over time, all citizens in Mallard married people with a lighter skin tone, so "each generation [would be] lighter than the one before" (6). In creating this village, Bennett "literalizes colorism" in a way that is concrete (Grady). In this way, the reader can critically question the idea of colorism and assess what their own role is within the ongoing oppression in contemporary society. In addition, Bennett entwines this topic with the topic of racial passing. As a result of the internalization of colorism, many citizens of Mallard pass for white either for a certain period of time or forever. Yet, in passing for white, the citizens also resist the ideas of the racial segregation and point out that race is a social construct. In writing about racial passing as a successful way to resist the binaries of the segregation era, Bennett also subverts the moralizing conventions of passing. In this manner, this chapter will argue that Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* questions colorism and the traditional passing tropes.

4.1 The Internalization of Trauma in The Vanishing Half

The Vanishing Half discusses numerous traumatic experiences, which all have an impact on the protagonists. For instance, the novel reveals the abuse of Desiree Vignes by her husband, the sexual assault of Stella Vignes by her employer Mr. Dupont, the loss of a twin sister, and it discusses how the twins watch the lynching of their father. Additionally, the novel considers how colorism negatively affects the citizens of Mallard in their daily lives. By including all these different traumas in the novel, Bennett discusses both how one sudden and horrific event can cause traumatizing effects, and how a trauma can develop through the accumulation of continual discrimination. These multiple traumas are all entwined with each other and impact the protagonists. This entanglement makes it hard to pinpoint whether the ongoing discrimination or the event-based traumas caused the traumatic responses in the protagonists. As a result, some attention will be paid to the event-based traumas in the novel. However, this chapter will center the traumas resulting from colorism, because it causes traumatizing effects over time, which correlates with the main focus of this thesis. In particular, it will concentrate on Stella Vignes and Jude Winston's traumas. Even though both characters internalize ideas of white supremacy, resulting from colorism, Stella decides to pass for white and gives up her black identity, while Jude overcomes the biases of colorism and eventually embraces her physical appearance and identity.

In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella and Desiree's choices are contrasted with each other, which emphasizes how Stella has internalized ideas of white supremacy. Even though both girls grew up in Mallard, Stella internalizes its "colorstruck" ideologies, while Desiree actively resists them (Bennett 23). As mentioned, in Mallard, "lightness" in skin color is seen as a "gift", and these ideals are also repeated in the school Stella and Desiree attend (6). For instance, during the

Founder's Day picnic, speeches are given about Alphonse Decuir, the founder of Mallard and its ideology. Furthermore, Alphonse's ideas center the creation of "a more perfect Negro" (6). This phrase not only shows how he equates "perfect" with having a lighter skin color, but it also echoes the preamble of the American constitution: "We the People of the United States, in Order to form *a more perfect Union*, establish Justice[.]" (National Archives, emphasis added). By paralleling the preamble of the constitution, the phrase emphasizes how this ideology is inscribed in the 'national' identity of Mallard. Besides, the twins "grew up hearing stories about folks who'd pretended to be white", in which passing is perceived as something "funny" and even "[h]eroic" (78). In this manner, the girls are indoctrinated with the ideas that having a light skin color is something extremely desirable, and that those who have a light skin color are more beautiful. Moreover, the act of passing is taught to the girls as something practical. Stella internalizes these views, which can be concluded from the first time she racially passes in Darlene's Charms shop. In this passage, she passes because it is "practical, so practical that, at the time, her decision seemed laughably obvious" (250).

Yet, when Stella decides to pass for good, she also passes for the freedom and safety she gains in pretending to be white. As indicated in the previous paragraph, Stella witnessed the lynching of her father, and is raped by her employer Mr. Dupont. As a result, she has depressive periods and nightmares about the time that her father was lynched: "[h]er nightmares were always the same, white men grabbing her ankles and dragging her screaming out of the bed" (169). She also has flashbacks to the lynching and rape when she and her husband have sexual intercourse: "[s]ometimes when [Blake] touched her, she saw the man who'd dragged her father onto the porch, the one with the red-gold hair. … Blake pressed open her thighs and the man with the red-gold hair was on top of her" (182). While the sexual abuse and the lynching are no

microaggressions, they are also foremostly caused by racism, and the intersections between race, gender, and class. Stella recognizes this racial bias as well, for instance, after the lynching of her father, she comments: “unimportant men were killed to make the point that they were unimportant – that they were not even men – and the world continued on” (201). In this example, Stella realizes that her father was lynched to make the point that he was racially inferior in comparison to white people, which indicates that she knows that it was a hate crime. By passing for white, she can protect herself from any sexual abuse and lynching in the future. Stella is more vulnerable to these experiences as a black woman than as a white woman, because white women have a higher position in the social hierarchy. In this way, her choice to pass was both a decision out of the internalization of colorism, and out of safety.

However, Stella’s internalization of colorism and white supremacy contrasts with Desiree, who firmly resists them. Although both girls went to the same schools and listened to the same speeches about the founder of Mallard and his ideology, Desiree does not internalize them. Instead, she “rolled her eyes when the founder was mentioned in school” (Bennett 7). Likewise, when the history of the village is taught to Desiree, she does not want “to be a part of the town that was her birthright. How she felt like you could flick away history like shrugging a hand off your shoulder” (7). From these two examples, it becomes evident that Desiree tries to ignore the topic when people talk about it. Additionally, they emphasize that she does not want anything to do with these ideals. “[E]veryone’s obsession with lightness” is then also the eventual reason why Desiree wanted to run away from Mallard: “They funny down there. Colorstruck. That’s why I left” (10; 23). Instead of staying in Mallard, Desiree runs away from the village to avoid playing a part in the transmission of its “colorstruck” ideology (23). Furthermore, after leaving the village, Desiree resists the lightness ideals of Mallard by marrying

"the darkest man she could find" (4). In this act, she consciously opposes Mallard's colorism as "in Mallard nobody married dark" (5). Desiree's resistance of these destructive ideals draws attention to Stella's internalization, as the oppositions between the twins effectively points them out. Bennett comments on this aspect in an interview as well:

> I knew that my entry point was going to be these twin sisters who make different choices as far as which race that they want to live and which community they belong to. … I wanted to think about all the different ways in which we make choices that shape who we are, and [think] about the ways in which making those choices and creating ourselves … can be very liberating, but it can also be very painful[.] (Grady)

As Bennett confirms, it is the oppositions between the twins that emphasize how certain life choices can turn out to be either "liberating" or "painful" (Grady). Stella's decision to pass for white, and the subsequent painful consequences of this decision, are only emphasized because the reader also reads Desiree's narrative, which contrasts with Stella's decision.

Moreover, Stella's internalization can also be deduced from her language assimilation, which transformed from African American English to general American English. As previously mentioned, speech is an important sign by which one can measure the cultural assimilation of people (Fanon 92). In the beginning of the novel, Stella speaks African American English. For instance, when the twins just started to work in the Dixie Laundry factory after they ran away, Stella comments: "I don't care how many toilets I got to jump in. … I ain't goin back to Mallard" (63). Apart from the word 'ain't', which is a typical indicator of a lower social class status, Stella does not pronounce the 'g' in 'going', which signifies a consonant cluster reduction. In addition, she leaves out the copula verb in this sentence, when saying "I got to jump in", and this happens again when she mentions that it is easy to racially pass: "White folks, so

easy to fool!" (63;78). Both the reduction of the copula and the consonant cluster are typical features of African American English (Thomas 455; 470). This differs notably with Stella's language use after she decided to pass for white, since she does not speak with these features anymore. Desiree notes this change as well during their reunion: "'You talk different now,' Desiree said. 'What do you mean?' Stella said. 'Like that. Wut do you mean. How'd you learn to talk like that?' Stella paused, then smiled. 'Television,' she said. 'I used to watch hours of it. Just to learn how to sound like them'" (Bennett 360). In this example, Desiree points out that Stella speaks general American English, as she pronounces 'what' like 'wut', which is commonly done in this variety of American. Stella's reply also emphasizes that she actively learned how to sound like white Americans. This choice indicates that she preferred the white standard over her own accent, which in turn underscores how she has internalized the ideas of white supremacy.

Besides the syntactical and phonological changes, Stella's word choices differ as well. For instance, she often calls Kennedy "darling" instead of "honey" which she uses in the beginning of the novel to refer to Desiree (287; 12). In addition, she describes Kennedy's acting as "marvelous" and "lovely" (287). These words are commonly associated with the higher social class, and allude to Stella's rise in social class status. Besides, after Jude confronts Stella with the truth at the theater, Stella frequently describes Jude as "that dark girl [who] emerged from the shadows" or as the "dark girl [that kept on] creeping up" (284; 288). These specific words articulate Stella's attitudes and beliefs, and they point out how she believes in the negative stereotypes about African Americans. Stella imagines Jude as a black girl waiting in the shadows just to creep up on her to blackmail her, only on the basis of the color of Jude's skin. Therefore, Stella immediately associates Jude's skin color with negative stereotypes about black people. In this case, the stereotype of the African American stealing from a white woman: "Maybe this girl

thought she could come to California and threaten to expose Stella. Blackmail her, even!" (284). In this way, Stella's stereotypical thinking shows again how she has internalized white ideologies regarding skin color.

Furthermore, Stella internalizes the values of colorism and white supremacy so thoroughly that she reinforces the hierarchy and biases of racial segregation to other African Americans. When Reggie, Loretta and Cindy Walker, an African American family, want to move into Stella's neighborhood, she is depicted as the most "fervent" protestor against the integration of the family during the "emergency Homeowners Association meeting" (Bennett 164-165). During the meeting, she "gripped the room" with her speech, even though "she [normally] never spoke up in their meetings" and "wasn't one for demonstrating" (164-165). Stella's intense reaction to speak up during the meeting demonstrates that she is very committed to hinder the integration of a black family into the neighborhood. It also emphasizes how Stella tries to reinforce the racial segregation of white and colored neighborhoods. Although she also wants to block the family from moving in because of the risk that they might find out her passing secret and reveal it, she actively preserves the dominant ideology of Jim Crow. Additionally, Stella teaches this destructive ideology to her daughter, Kennedy. At first, Kennedy is not allowed to play with Cindy Walker after they moved into the neighborhood, and when Stella catches the girls playing dolls together, "[s]he'd stormed across the street and grabbed her daughter's arm, both girls gapping as she dragged Kennedy back into the house. She was shaking, fumbling to lock the door behind her as her daughter whined about the doll she'd left in the street" (185). Once inside, "Stella told her daughter the same thing she'd heard [the mother of another white girl] say. 'Because we don't play with niggers,'" (186). From this passage, it becomes evident that because Stella was once excluded from playing with a white girl, she

teaches the same ideas about black people to her daughter, by exactly reiterating what the white mother said to her when she was younger. Stella's mimicking is also an expression of her own trauma, since this scene emphasizes how she has internalized the ideas of white supremacy when the white mother told her not to play with her daughter, only because of the color of her skin. Moreover, Kennedy repeats these ideas again to Cindy, as Kennedy says later in the novel to Cindy that she does not "want to play with a nigger" (223). In this manner, Stella repeats the racial discourse towards black people and even teaches the racial biases to her daughter.

In addition to Stella, Jude Winston internalizes the ideas of colorism as well. As a result of Desiree fleeing to Mallard to escape her abusive husband, Jude also grows up in this "colorstruck" village (Bennett 23). As mentioned before, most of the citizens within Mallard see "[l]ightness" as a "gift" (6). In this way, Jude radically stands out because of her darker skin tone. As a result, she is continually discriminated by both the adults and her class peers in the village. For instance, most people spread around "crude whispers … each time [Desiree and Jude] walked around town" (73). They also call her names and as an adult, Jude enumerates them once at a dinner party:

> Tar Baby. Midnight. Darky. Mudpie. Said, Smile, we can't see you. Said, You so dark you blend into the chalkboard. Said, Bet, you could show up naked to a funeral. Bet lightning bugs follow you in the daytime. Bet when you swim it look like oil. (94)

This enumeration not only points out how the village is focused on having a light skin color, since all the name calling refers to Jude's darker skin tone, but it also emphasizes that she was constantly degraded during her childhood in Mallard. Consequently, Jude internalizes the ideas of colorism. For instance, she becomes so self-conscious of her skin color that she tries to lighten it with the help of her grandmother. During the first summer in Mallard, they "poured baths with

lemon and milk … [Grandma] pasted honey masks on [Jude's] face, then slowly peeled them off. She juiced oranges, mixed them with spices, and applied the mixture to Jude's face" (119). All the time and effort, Jude puts into the making of creams and face masks confirm that she is not satisfied with her own skin tone, and desires to lighten her skin. Even after she leaves Mallard and has a loving boyfriend, she cannot believe that he actually loves her: "[s]he couldn't imagine any boy loving her "(126). This particular thought of Jude is reiterated throughout the novel and underscores how self-conscious Jude is. For example, she mentions it again after she and Reese have had sexual intercourse: "[Reese] didn't mind that she was dark, maybe, but he couldn't possibly like it. Nobody could" (149). This reiteration draws attention to how Jude loathes the color of her skin, which in turn emphasizes the internalization of colorism and the white beauty ideology. This internalization is so thorough that even after she left Mallard, the ideals from "the town wouldn't leave her" (141).

4.2 Overcoming Colorism in The Vanishing Half

Despite the internalization of colorism, Jude overcomes these biases and eventually embraces her identity, which contrasts with Stella's narrative. As stated before, *The Vanishing Half* contains multiple narrative plots and perspectives, which are all entwined with each other. The integration of these multiple perspectives creates the opportunity for Bennett to discuss both the suffering caused by colorism, and center the plot towards the healing and overcoming of racial discrimination. This is reflected in the novel through the contrasting narratives of Stella and Jude. While Stella's perspective draws attention to the consequences of racial passing, such as

the loss of her black identity, Jude's perspective centers her (personal) growth in spite of the internalization. Her narrative primarily focuses on how she manages to leave Mallard and works hard towards a happy and successful life. After Jude wins the state championship in the 400 meters, for instance, she is offered a scholarship at the University of California, in Los Angeles. For Jude, this is her chance to "rescue … herself" from Mallard (93). In addition, Jude has multiple jobs during and after her college years. For example, she works as a waiter at catered events in Beverly Hills, so she can support Reese and herself. Eventually, this encourages and enables her to apply for medical school. In this way, even though she faced racial discrimination during her childhood and had to combine working with college in order to make ends meet, she perseveres and overcomes class, race and gender obstacles. Furthermore, Jude learns how to embrace her physical appearance and identity. When going to Venice beach in Los Angeles, Jude and Reese are swimming together even though "in Mallard, she never dared to swim in the river" (141). Although she feels vulnerable to show her skin on the beach and "pictured sunbathers laughing as soon as she tugged off her shirt", she does not avoid the water anymore like in Mallard, which indicates that she is starting to accept her outward characteristics (141). Additionally, Jude mentions that she is glad that she grew up with Desiree as a mother instead of Stella, when Desiree reflects upon certain life choices: "'Sometimes I think I should've left sooner. For you and for me. We could've been anywhere. I could've been like Stella, lived a big life.' 'I'm glad you're not like her,' [Jude] said. 'I'm glad I ended up with you'" (386). Although Stella "lived a big life", by gaining a higher status and material wealth, Jude embraces her mom's life choices and is happy with her life with Reese (386). Thus, Jude's narrative plot centers her self-empowerment and healing from racial discrimination. This also resembles Irene Visser's theory, in which postcolonial novels focusing on trauma differentiate themselves from

the classic trauma theories by reversing them. Instead of centering the suffering of victims, they focus on the victim's resistance and eventual healing (127). Likewise, *The Vanishing Half* transforms the traditional assumptions of trauma theory, by depicting Jude's perseverance, resistance and the eventual overcoming of trauma resulting from colorism, while also recognizing the suffering and consequences of colorism through the plotline of Stella.

Furthermore, it is not only through Jude Winston that Bennett shows the self-empowerment of African Americans during the Jim Crow era. The village of Mallard also questions and ridicules the racial segregation. Most citizens internalize the ideas of colorism in Mallard and also preserve these ideas, which are entwined with the ideas of white supremacy. As shown, everyone in the village has an "obsession with lightness" (Bennett 10). For instance, at the local barbershop people are arguing "about whose wife was fairer", or "people believing ridiculous things, like drinking coffee or eating chocolate while pregnant might turn a baby dark" (10). This obsession shows how most people in Mallard have internalized the ideas of colorism. Moreover, most citizens even reinforce these ideas, as they pass them over to the next generation. As mentioned, Jude's grandmother, for example, helps Jude to lighten up her skin with all sorts of creams and remedies. She also keeps Jude "out of the sun" during the summer, and pressures her to wear a "big gardening hat" in order to make sure that her skin does not darken any further (94). These harmful acts reaffirm Jude's racial self-loathing, as her skin tone does not adhere to Mallard's ideology. In this way, Adele Vignes passes her ideas of colorism over to her granddaughter Jude. However, even though most citizens of Mallard have internalized beliefs of white supremacy and sustain the dominant racial hierarchy, they simultaneously ridicule the racial segregation between black and white.

Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator mentions multiple times that Mallard "was

more idea than place" and this idea behind Mallard mocks the authority and principles of the segregation laws (6). The idea itself was to create a place in between the binaries of the Jim Crow laws:

> The idea arrived to Alphonse Decuir in 1848, as he stood in the sugarcane fields he'd inherited from the father who'd once owned him. The father now dead, the now-freed son wished to build something on those acres of land that would last for centuries to come. A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes. A third place. (6)

In creating the village of Mallard, Alphonse Decuir resists the racial segregation laws which are established on the binary of black versus white. Instead, he creates "a third place" from which its citizens can actually resist both categories; they neither define themselves as "Negroes", nor as white (6). From this liminal place, they examine the normalized knowledges of the Jim Crow era. One example which the citizens of Mallard often question is the idea of having fixed identities. Many of its citizens regularly pass for white: "Warren Fontenot, riding a train in the white section, … Marlena Goudeau becoming white to earn her teaching certificate, [and] … Luther Thibodeaux, whose foremen marked him white and gave him more pay" (78). By momentarily passing for white, the people of Mallard show how one's physical appearance does not determine their identity and that race is a social construct. In this manner, they question the normalized knowledges of the caste system, and even pose a threat to the racial hierarchy. This resistance towards the dominant culture resembles Bhabha's mimicry theory, in which the colonized people question the norms of the colonizer in order to destabilize the hegemonic relations within society (Godiwala 62). Likewise, the citizens of Mallard question normalized ideas of the dominant society and resist the binaries between black and white.

In addition, Bennett's style of narration forces the reader to consciously reflect their own position within the system of racial discrimination. According to Stef Craps, evoking empathy for the protagonist can preclude a critical self-reflection by the reader (42). He argues that when readers are asked to respond with empathy, they will pity the victim rather than assessing their own role in the ongoing degradation of minorities (42). This returns in *The Vanishing Half*, in which Bennett's narration encourages a critical self-reflection from the reader. For example, she often leaves out descriptions of how the protagonists emotionally feel after they are discriminated, such as in the example of when Jude is bullied by Lonnie Goudeau:

> Lonnie flecked mud at her socks and threw her books into the trash. Jostled her chair leg during exams, yanked the ribbons in her hair, sang 'Tutti-frutti, dark Judy' as soon as she was in earshot. On the last day of fifth grade, the tripped her down the school steps and scraped her knee. At the kitchen table, her grandma pulled her leg onto her lap, gently swabbing the blood with a cotton ball[.] (Bennett 96)

This example emphasizes Lonnie's insults like an enumeration of facts rather than focusing on Jude's emotions, even though it is Jude who is being bullied. It also avoids Jude's perspective, as it skips directly from Lonnie letting Jude trip over the school steps to her grandmother cleaning Jude's scraped knee. In his way, there is less sympathy evoked from the reader. In addition, the novel is written from the third person rather than from a first-person narration. This choice creates a distance between the protagonists and the reader. This distance is reinforced by the past tense, since it already happened to the victims in the past, and it is not something that is directly 'witnessed' by the reader. This distance avoids that the reader pities the protagonists. Instead, Bennett stimulates the reader to critically think about their own role in the ongoing discrimination of African Americans. For instance, the omniscient narrator asks rhetorical

questions intended for the reader; questions such as how to define someone's race or identity when the citizens of Mallard are so light skinned, they can easily pass for white: "Well, who were these people walking about? Fair and blonde and redheaded, the darkest people no swarthier than a Greek? Was this who counted for colored in America, who whites wanted to keep separate? Well how could they tell the difference?" (6-7). These rhetorical questions force the reader to critically think about the topics of colorism and racial discrimination. Moreover, Bennett specifically expresses through Loretta Walker that many African Americans do not need guilt or pity from white people: "You think I want your guilt?' she said. 'Your guilt can't do nothin for me, honey. You want to feel good about feelin bad, you can go on and do it right across the street." (200). Through Loretta, Bennett points out that black people are not waiting for pity or guilt. Furthermore, by phrasing it in a rhetorical question, in which the question is indirectly also intended for the white reader, she forces the reader again to critically assess their own position within society, as she places the reader in the role of the bystander or potential collaborator.

Moreover, *The Vanishing Half* prioritizes how traumas can be generationally transferred, which supports the critical self-reflection by the readers. The novel draws attention to how traumatic experiences, which are driven by racial biases, can be transferred from generation to generation. For instance, it is emphasized in the novel that Alphonse founded Mallard after "he'd inherited [the sugarcane fields] from the father who'd once owned him" (Bennett 6). Alphonse was an enslaved man, whose mother is suggested to have been sexually abused by his white father, as "[h]is mother had hated his lightness", and his lightness was "inherited as great cost" (6). In this way, the novel starts with slavery, which initiated the traumas in the following generations, as the institution of slavery started to integrate racial biases into society in order to

justify the degradation of black people. For example, it is his mother's hate of his lightness that led Alphonse to found this town: "His mother … begging him to darken. Maybe that's what made him first dream of the town" (6). Yet, as mentioned before, Mallard causes the following generations of citizens to internalize ideas of colorism. This internalization is demonstrated through the omniscient narration, as this allows Bennett to skip from generation to generation:

> I think I knew that I wanted to play with this omniscience, this kind of all-knowing voice that will dip in and out of the different characters and follow them as they go to different places. But I think I also always thought about that omniscience being grounded in the town where the book opens and the town that the book centers around. (Grady)

The omniscient narration emphasizes how Mallard, and in particular its ideas of colorism, is 'grounded' in the next generations, such as the generation of Stella and Desiree Vignes, and the one of Jude and Kennedy. In addition, the omniscience shows how multiple generations suffer from traumatic experiences as a result of the racial degradation. For instance, the narrative shows how the lynching of Leon Vignes during the segregation era impacted the twins:

> The twins had always seemed both blessed and cursed; they'd inherited, from their mother, the legacy of an entire town, and from their father, a lineage hollowed by loss. Four Vignes boys, all dead by thirty. The eldest collapsed in a chain gang from heatstroke; the second gassed in a Belgium trench; the third stabbed in a bar fight; and the youngest, Leon Vignes, lynched twice, the first time 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. … [The twins] witnessed the first lynching but would forever imagine the second[.] (Bennett 36)

This passage emphasizes that the twins inherited "a lineage hollowed by loss" from their father, since Leon and all his brothers passed away before the age of thirty (36). It also shows how this traumatic event is in turn passed over to Desiree and Stella, as they would never forget his lynching. Moreover, Bennett even includes how this moment affects Kennedy Sanders, who does not even know about the lynching. Like her mother Stella, Kennedy has nightmares as a young girl: "[i]n the middle of the night, [Kennedy] woke up screaming, … twisted in her covers, clenching the sheets … Kennedy, only seven, never remembered [the nightmares afterwards]" (169). Kennedy's nightmares are caused by the transference of transgenerational trauma. According to Gabrielle Schwab, it is possible for "an individual or a generation [to] unwittingly speak the unconscious of a previous individual or generation in a cryptic speech marked by an unspeakable secret" (qtd. in Pederson 105). This resembles Kennedy's situation, since she unconsciously witnesses her mother's experiences through cryptic nightmares. Although Kennedy cannot remember the nightmares, she is also impacted by Leon's lynching. In this manner, the novel points out how traumatic experiences can be both transferred over generations and are experienced in every generation as a result of racial degradation. The frequent reminder of this message enhances the critical self-reflection by the reader.

This message, in addition to Bennett's narration style, leads to the mobilization of readers. Bennett's evasion of emotions throughout the novel, and the omniscient narrator, enhance the critical self-reflection of the reader. This self-reflection is even more increased by the frequent reminders that the traumas are all transferred through multiple generations and are driven by racial biases. In this sense, the narrative devices used by Bennet, shape the political messages in the novel and encourage people to politically mobilize. In addition, they are practically used to make these political messages of the novel more comprehensible for a wider

audience. For instance, Bennett's use of the third-person narration, and the evasion of emotional responses of the protagonists, through which the narration becomes more factual, make the novel more accessible. Likewise, Bennett's creation of the fictional town of Mallard "literalizes colorism" (Grady). Bennett mentioned in an interview that she wanted to present the ideas of colorism to the reader in a "tangible and concrete" way, rather than as an "abstract or political idea" (Grady). In this manner, she emphasizes that "the idea of colorism [is not] something that people are just talking about – but something that is present in this town, you cannot escape it" (Grady). Therefore, in 'literalizing' the ideals of colorism through Mallard, Bennett creates an accessible way for the reader to grasp these destructive beliefs and their consequences for society. This accessible writing style is similar to many postcolonial novels, which often prioritize the message in order to make people aware of the ongoing oppression (Craps 42). The "political urgency" in these novels encourages the author to choose the message over the aesthetic of the novel, as Craps indicates that "there is a sense that the story must be told" (43). Similarly, *The Vanishing Half* uses its accessible narration to call attention to the ongoing racial discrimination of African Americans. This strategy stimulates its readers to actively mobilize.

4.3 Conclusion to Bennett's The Vanishing Half

The Vanishing Half is centered on how trauma resulting from racial discrimination and colorism impacts African Americans. This topic is emphasized through the contrast between Stella and Desiree Vignes. Whereas Stella internalizes the ideas of colorism, Desiree challenges them. This becomes evident after both girls run away from Mallard and Stella decides to pass for white,

while Desiree eventually returns to the village. Stella's internalization is also visible through her language use, which assimilates from African American English to general American English. In addition, Stella's internalization is also contrasted to Jude Winston's internalization. While Stella internalizes the ideals of colorism so thoroughly that she decides to pass for white and, in this manner, reinforces the racial hierarchy, Jude overcomes the standards of colorism and learns how to embrace her identity. The idea of colorism is also represented through the fictional village of Mallard. Most of Mallard's citizens have internalized the idea that lightness is something desirable. In this way, they preserve the white ideals of beauty and uphold the racial hierarchy. However, Mallard's idea to become a "third place" in which its citizens refuse to be either defined as black or white, also challenges the binaries of the segregation era and their normalized knowledges (Bennett 6). Lastly, *The Vanishing Half* also calls attention to how traumatic experiences driven by racism started during slavery, and both frequently caused the return of traumatic experiences in multiple generations, and led to the transference of these experiences from generation to generation through secondary witnessing.

By writing a novel about these topics, Bennett's novel questions not only the standards of colorism, but also the idea of having an essential identity. For instance, the novel shows how there are biases within black communities regarding the color of one's skin. It draws attention to how black communities have internalized white supremacy theories of American society and, as a result, have come to see African Americans with a lighter skin tone as more beautiful than people with a darker skin tone. As mentioned before, Bennett also "literalizes [the concept of] colorism" by creating the fictional town of Mallard. This makes the ideals of colorism concrete and more understandable for readers, who can question these standards (Grady). In this manner, Bennett creates visibility for the racial discrimination within black communities. In addition, *The*

Vanishing Half questions the ideas of the traditional passing tropes, such as the trope of the tragic mulatto. As mentioned before, in many depictions of the tragic mulatto, a biracial woman usually suffers from the tragedy of her "racial liminality", as she is alienated from the black community (Clark 260). The myth also emphasizes her self-hatred and the inevitable suicide attempt at the end (260; 263). In an interview Bennett comments that she was aware of the tropes surrounding passing literature and did not want to correct Stella at the end of her novel: "I didn't want to punish Stella per se. I certainly didn't want to kill her or have her fall or jump or get pushed out of a window. I knew that those were some tropes of the genre that I want to avoid" (Grady). Even though Bennett emphasizes the suffering of Stella's choice to pass for white, the narrative plot does not end with the death of Stella. Instead, she returns one last time to Mallard to speak to Desiree about their history and Stella's decision to pass. Moreover, Stella eventually admits to her daughter Kennedy that she is African American and they have an open conversation about Stella's past in Mallard. In this way, everything turns out well in the end. By creating a passing narrative with a relatively happy ending, Bennett's novel reimagines what a twenty-first century passing narrative would look like, and avoids moralizing the act of Stella's passing. Additionally, Mallard's citizens also pass momentarily for white to "sit in the white section" or to "earn [a] teaching certificate" (Bennett 78). By doing this, they successfully resist the racial segregation of the Jim Crow era. This example indicates again a favorable way of writing about racial passing without the moralizing ending. Therefore, the relatively happy ending of Stella's narrative, and the fictional town of Mallard, in which its citizens successfully resist the binaries of segregation era, emphasize how *The Vanishing Half* subverts the conventions of the traditional passing plot.

Conclusion

This thesis focused on how traumas resulting from ongoing racism are represented in the form and content of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. Consequently, this thesis discussed how these traumas affected the protagonists' identities. When analyzing the content of the novels, it becomes clear that most of the protagonists internalize the racist ideals from the dominant society. This internalization is an expression of trauma. In *Passing* and *The Vanishing Half* both Irene Redfield and Stella Vignes's internalization can be viewed in their use of language, for instance, in their use of morphology and syntax. In the novels, both characters mimic the language of the white upper-class. Even though Brian Redfield and Clare Kendry sometimes still speak in African American English, Irene avoids speaking in this accent completely. Likewise, before Stella's act of passing, she speaks in African American English, whereas she does not speak in this accent anymore after her decision to pass for white. Instead, both women use words which are associated with the upper classes. Furthermore, Irene's internalization is represented through the monoracial relationship with her black servants, which resembles the relation between the black servant and the white mistress. Besides, Pecola Breedlove's internalization can be seen in her intense desire to become the epitome of the white beauty ideals: a white blond girl with blue eyes. In *The Bluest Eye,* Pecola wants to absorb the 'blueness' of Mary Jane's eyes by eating a Mary Jane candy, and by drinking milk, Pecola hopes to absorb its whiteness. In this manner, it becomes clear that she wants to adhere to the white beauty ideals. Furthermore, all three novels emphasize how this internalization leads to the loss of a sense of self. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola eventually loses her sense of self when she starts to hallucinate. Additionally, Stella, Irene and Clare all repress a part of their identity when they racially pass for white.

Moreover, all three novels draw attention to the consequences of this internalization, as they all emphasize how the protagonists repeat the racial discrimination they suffered towards the people in their own community and onto the next generation. When analyzing the novels with Homi Bhabha's mimicry theory, it turns out that Irene Redfield resembles Bhabha's hazardous form of mimicry in *Passing*. She internalizes the racist beliefs of the American caste system so thoroughly that she repeats those attitudes to the people she represents, for instance, to her maids Zulena and Sadie. Furthermore, both Morrison's novel and Bennett's novel indicate how their main characters passed on these racist ideologies to their children. In *The Bluest Eye*, Geraldine and Pauline demonstrate how African Americans are often complicit in the oppression, as they both instilled these prejudices in Louis Junior and Pecola. Similarly, *The Vanishing Half* shows how Stella passes them on to her daughter Kennedy. In centering the internalization of racism, and showing how this is repeated to others, the representation of trauma resulting from ongoing racism deviates from event-based traumas.

Furthermore, all three novels challenged the notions of racial identities at their time of publication. Although both *Passing* and *The Vanishing Half* challenge the conventions of the tragic mulatto myth, Larsen's novel questions the myth by including complicated characters and reversing the ending, while Bennett's novel avoids any moralization of the act of passing. *Passing* mostly questions it by its psychologically complicated and ambiguous characters, such as Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, which differ from the typical flat characters of the myth. Additionally, the novel's ending deviates as well. Instead of the stereotypical suicide, it is clearly suggested through the foreshadowing and the description of the event itself that Clare is pushed through the window by Irene. Moreover, Clare is pushed because she wanted to return to the black community. This again contrasts with the myth, as African Americans are consistently

punished in the myth for the act of passing for white. Contrastingly, Bennett's novel avoids any form of punishment for Stella. Even though the novel emphasizes Stella Vignes's suffering from her decision to pass for white, her narrative does have a relatively happy ending. In the end, she talks about her decision to pass with her daughter Kennedy, and she even returns to Mallard to reunite with her twin sister for one last time. In this manner, the novel has no unresolved problems in the end.

In addition, both *Passing* and *The Vanishing Half* question the beliefs of having an essential identity. For instance, Larsen's novel draws attention to this by juxtaposing the characters of Irene Redfield with Clare Kendry. As indicated before, Irene parallels Bhabha's hazardous form of mimicry, while Clare parallels Bhabha's performative form of mimicry. While Irene internalizes the beliefs of the caste system, Clare can both adapt to the cultural customs of white society, while also maintaining an underlying adherence to the black community. In this sense, Irene preserves the white dominant structures of society, whereas Clare undermines them. Similarly, *The Vanishing Half* contrasts the protagonists Stella and Desiree Vignes with each other, to emphasize how Stella internalizes the ideals of colorism and white supremacy. In Mallard, the girls are both indoctrinated with the "colorstruck" ideologies of Mallard (Bennett 23). However, after running away, only Stella decides to pass for white, while Desiree chooses to marry a man with a darker skin tone. This contrast between the twins emphasizes how only Stella internalized the ideas of colorism. Furthermore, similar to *Passing*, it emphasizes how one can either reinforce the hegemonic structures of the American caste system or question them. Yet, while both protagonists pass for white in Larsen's *Passing*, only one of the contrasted characters passes in *The Vanishing Half*.

Furthermore, *The Bluest Eye* and *The Vanishing Half* also both resist the dominant beauty

standards within American society. Both novels call attention to how physical beauty is often entwined with whiteness, while ugliness is associated with blackness. However, Morrison's novel questions these ideals both in society in general and within black communities themselves, whereas Bennett's novel focuses solely on the prejudices within black communities. For instance, *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes this idea by centralizing the experiences of Pecola Breedlove, who faces daily microaggressions because of the darker color of her skin. In the novel, Pecola is frequently contrasted with Shirley Temple and Maureen Peal, who exemplify the ideals of white beauty standards. *The Vanishing Half* questions these prejudices through the character of Jude Winston and the village of Mallard. Like Pecola Breedlove, Jude Winston continually faces microaggressions in her village because of her darker skin tone. However, Bennett's novel centers on how the citizens of Mallard, a black community, intimidate Jude on a daily basis. Another difference is that Morrison's novel centers on Pecola's silence, whereas *The Vanishing Half* addresses both Jude's suffering and her eventual triumph of the daily discrimination. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's perspective is almost always silenced and the reader only learns about the racial discrimination through the focalization of Claudia Macteer and the omniscient narrator. In this manner, Pecola has no narrative voice and actually 'unbecomes' someone in the novel. This 'unbecoming' of Pecola also contrasts with the genre of the Bildungsroman and is strengthened by the fact that she has no opinions, undertakes no action, and becomes mentally ill at the end of the novel. Contrastingly, Bennett's novel simultaneously shows how Jude suffers from colorism and overcomes these prejudices. In the end of the novel, she eventually learns to embrace her identity and even returns to Mallard.

Additionally, all three novels use their narrative stylistics to enhance the (political) message in their novels. Yet, they all use different narrative strategies to achieve this objective.

For instance, *Passing* uses some characteristics associated with Modernism. Throughout the novel, it is difficult to determine what exactly caused Irene Redfield's trauma, because of the limited omniscient point of view, which focalizes Irene's perspective. In the novel, she (un)consciously represses her trauma, which – in narratological terms – results in the ellipsis of elements. This ellipsis in turn causes the narrative to become fragmented and interrupted. Furthermore, the ellipsis also causes multiple belated revelations which alter the meaning of the events in the novel. In addition to the fragmentation, the syntax, morphology and punctuation used in the novel also call attention to Irene's internalization. For instance, it is Irene's particular language use which points out that she mimics the white upper-class society. Similarly, it is the punctuation, in particular the repeated use of the full stop, which emphasizes that Irene separates herself from her racial identity.

Likewise, *The Bluest Eye* also uses characteristics commonly associated with Postmodernism. The numerous narrative perspectives from the people in Pecola's community create a fragmented and non-linear text. By including these multiple perspectives, the novel tries to formulate Pecola's trauma resulting from ongoing discrimination and violence. Moreover, these perspectives effectively dramatize the daily microaggressions Pecola faces, as it is the reiteration which creates visibility for the destructive effects of racial discrimination. In addition, the novel consists of different narrative voices, such as the first-person narration and the (limited) omniscient narration. At the beginning of the novel, for instance, the history of the Breedlove family is told from an omniscient narrator, but Pauline's chapter includes letters, which are written in the first person, and in turn, the novel reflects on these letters in the form of a limited omniscient narrator. These different narrative voices again add to the fragmentation of the text, since the reader has to actively reconstruct the text in order to understand Pecola's

traumatic experiences. Besides, the novel suspends the logical customs of grammar, punctuation and capitalization. For instance, in the three excerpts of the Dick and Jane primer. Through this experimental writing style, Morrison rejects the familiar representation of a novel and again emphasizes how the constant microaggressions Pecola faces have accumulated over time and eventually caused her mental illness.

Contrastingly, *The Vanishing Half* uses narrative techniques which can be best explained with postcolonial theory. Throughout the novel, Bennett's narration encourages readers to consciously reflect on their own position within the system of racial discrimination, and to actively mobilize. For instance, the novel is written from a third-person omniscient narration. This narrative choice creates a distance between the protagonist and the reader, which is necessary for the reader in order to critically asses their own position. Furthermore, this gap between the reader and protagonist is widened by the past tense and Bennett's factual writing tone. As a result of the past tense, the reader does not directly witness the traumatic events that the protagonists experience. Furthermore, the factual writing tone prevents the reader from feeling empathy. This is favorable, because empathy precludes the reader from assessing their own role in the system. Another way in which Bennett's narration encourages readers to assess their own position is by materializing the concept of colorism. In the novel, the village of Mallard makes the concept of colorism concrete, as Bennet created a fictional place which embodies those ideas. In this sense, the novel offers an accessible way for the reader to grasp the impact of these destructive beliefs and the subsequent consequences for society. The inclusion of multiple perspectives enhances this objective, because it allows the reader to compare and contrast different standpoints with each other. Furthermore, the different perspectives allow for the dramatization of the every-day discrimination. In this manner, this particular use of the

narrative devices is similar to many postcolonial novels, since they frequently use the stylistics of the novel to make readers aware of the ongoing oppression. Similarly, *The Vanishing Half* uses its narrative form to emphasize the ongoing racial discrimination of African Americans.

As a result, all three novels entwine the aesthetic stylistics in the form of the novel with the political messages in their novel. As mentioned in chapter one, Isobel Armstrong argues that the aesthetic of the novel is an important narrative device to make the political possible (43). According to Armstrong, the aesthetic creates a "culture-modifying space" which is both transgressive and communal, and, in this manner, enhances the opportunity to convey messages (40). This idea is also reflected in the novels, as it is the narrative stylistics which precisely point out the ideas formulated by Larsen, Morrison and Bennett. For instance, without the fragmentation and inclusion of multiple perspectives in *The Bluest Eye*, it would not have been possible to shape the silence and invisibility of Pecola Breedlove, while also breaking it. Likewise, it is mostly because of the omniscient third-person narration, the factual writing tone and the past tense in *The Vanishing Half* that there is a distance between the reader and the protagonist which enforces readers to consciously asses their own position within the structure of racial discrimination. In addition, the discussed topics in the novels are both transgressive and communal, because they create representation for decentered minorities in the United States, and they shift the boundaries of the dominant society. Moreover, these ideas connect African Americans. In this manner, Carolyn Denard argues that Morrison's fiction, for instance, "use[s] a form of semantic trickery to constitute a discourse of resistance" (18). Therefore, it is the combination of modernist narrative stylistics with the prioritization of black culture, which creates the opportunity for Larsen, Morrison and Bennett to question ideas of white supremacy.

To conclude, while both *Passing* and *The Bluest Eye* use narrative devices which are

traditionally associated with Modernism, *The Vanishing Half* deviates from this standard and uses a narrative style which can be associated with postcolonial literature. For this reason, both *Passing* and *The Bluest Eye* mimic the psychological symptoms of PTSD in the form of the novel. As mentioned before, Anne Whitehead favors this experimental writing style. However, Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* emphasizes that without this mimicry in the form of the novel, trauma resulting from constant racism can still be adequately expressed in the novel.

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