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*"Caught between Two Allegiances":*

*The Representation of Racial Passing in Jessie Redmon  
Fauset's Plum Bun and Brit Bennett's The Vanishing Half*

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## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	
<i>Introduction</i> .....	1
<i>Chapter 1: African American history and the trope of passing</i> .....	3
1.1. An overview of African American History .....	3
1.2. An overview of African American women's history .....	9
1.3. The 1920s: The New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance .....	11
1.4. Racial Passing in African American Literature .....	13
<i>Chapter 2: Jessie Redmon Fauset and Plum Bun</i> .....	17
2.1. The author.....	17
2.2. The representation of racial passing in <i>Plum Bun</i> .....	19
2.3. The representation of womanhood and female sexuality in <i>Plum Bun</i> .....	22
<i>Chapter 3: Plum Bun and The Vanishing Half</i> .....	29
3.1. African American history of the latter half of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century .....	29
3.2. <i>The Vanishing Half</i> : a contemporary novel of passing .....	36
3.3. A comparison between <i>Plum Bun</i> and <i>The Vanishing Half</i> .....	42
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	49
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	51
<i>Summary in Italian</i> .....	59



## **Abstract**

The main purpose of this thesis is to analyze and compare two novels, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929) by Jessie Redmon Fauset and *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett, to explore the evolution and the employment of the trope of racial passing in African American literature. As both novels take place in a century of radical social change, the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be outlined to provide a context for the reading of these two works. In particular, this thesis will examine and compare the rationales behind the passers' choice to cross the color line. Moreover, it will discuss the representation of passing, womanhood and female sexuality as well as the issues of identity and the power dynamics that regulate the relationships between men and women.



## Introduction

This thesis aims to explore the topic of racial passing as a social phenomenon as well as a literary trope in African American literature. To do so, two novels published approximately a century apart will be analyzed: Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929) and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020).

The first chapter is meant to provide a brief overview of the history of the United States as well as a general introduction to the topic of racial passing and its representations in literature. The knowledge of American history is essential to understand the establishment of the strict social hierarchies that define American society and offer the possibility of passing. Thus, I will outline the history of the United States from the arrival of the first slave ship in Jamestown in 1619 up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on the status of African Americans and their struggle for freedom. In addition, I will discuss the concept of intersectionality and double discrimination with respect to African American women, who, despite being doubly oppressed because of their race as well as their gender, have greatly contributed to the process of democratization of the United States. Moreover, an overview of the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement of the 1920s are fundamental to analyze Fauset's novel *Plum Bun*. Finally, the first chapter ends with an exploration of the trope of racial passing and how it has been used by African American novelists to expose the senselessness of the racial binary upon which American society is founded.

Despite being regarded by critics as a minor figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset's contribution to the movement was crucial for its development. In fact, from 1919 to 1926, she has served as literary editor for the NAACP's *The Crisis*, publishing the early works of some of the most prominent and avantgarde authors of the Harlem Renaissance. Nevertheless, scholars have made their evaluations on the sole basis of her fiction to label Fauset Victorian and conservative. Contrary to these critics' assessments, Fauset has explored a variety of issues relating to gender as well as race in her fiction, such as colorism, sexuality, the changing role of women within cities and the unequal power structures of American society. The second chapter will thus discuss Fauset's life and works and shed light on the more progressive aspects of her novel *Plum Bun*, focusing on the representation of passing, womanhood and female sexuality.

Finally, the third chapter aims at drawing a comparison between Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. To do so, I will outline the main events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to provide a context for *The Vanishing Half*. As a contemporary novel of passing, *The Vanishing Half* explores the issues of racism, colorism and, more broadly, that of identity in the span of a century that brought about radical changes within American society. Hence, reading these two novels side by side offers an insight into the different rationales behind passing throughout American history.

## **Chapter 1: African American history and the trope of passing**

### **1.1. An overview of African American History**

August 1619 marks the arrival of the first group of African slaves in the British colonies of North America. The *Mayflower* had not yet landed in Massachusetts when more than twenty Ndongans were purchased by the English settlers of Jamestown. These people from the Kingdom of Ndongo were the first of half a million Africans to be sold to the English colonies of North America from 1619 to the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade in 1867 (Painter 2007: 33).

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the development of new technologies and instruments of navigation allowed Spanish and Portuguese ships to reach unknown lands around the globe and trade with foreign populations. Within a century, Spanish and Portuguese explorers had landed in the Americas and circumnavigated the African continent to find an alternative route to India. In 1576, the Portuguese founded the colony of Luanda along the Atlantic coast of Africa, in modern-day Angola, and formed an alliance with the Imbangala warriors (Painter 2007: 25). The Portuguese would sell firearms to the Imbangala in exchange for their defeated enemies. The founding generation of African Americans, the twenty Ndongans, had fallen victim to this trading alliance. In 1617, the Portuguese and the Imbangala invaded the capital of the Kingdom of Ndongo and transported thousands of captives to Luanda, where they were boarded on the *Sao João Bautista*, a ship headed to Vera Cruz, Mexico. A Dutch ship raided the *Sao João Bautista*, seized twenty African captives and brought them to Jamestown, Virginia, where John Rolfe recorded their arrival in August 1619 (Elliott 2006: 104).

From the beginning of the European colonization of the Americas in 1492, European settlers had tried to establish a labor system to produce their commodities. The Spaniards had successfully managed to recruit the local Indigenous population to work in their mines in Central and South America, while the English colonists of North America failed in their attempts to enslave the Native peoples with whom they came into contact (Elliott 2006: 102). However, the rapid decline of the Indigenous population of the Americas due to enslavement, warfare and epidemics of European diseases led the colonizers to seek other sources of labor supply, such as the importation of European

indentured servants, who would work without wage to repay their journey to the New World, or African captives.

The Atlantic Slave Trade is responsible for the forced migration of a total of at least 12.4 million Africans to the European colonies of the Americas from 1492 to 1867 (Rediker 2007: 5). The journey to the New World lasted several months and consisted of three stages: the capture in the African hinterland and the march to the Atlantic coast; the sea voyage to the Americas, known as the Middle Passage; and the transfer from the American coast to the plantations (Painter 2007: 34). The Middle Passage was the most traumatic part of the journey, during which captives were crammed on slave ships to maximize profit. Overcrowding caused the spread of deadly diseases, which, in combination with malnourishment and dehydration, resulted in a mortality rate of 15/20% (Painter 2007: 35). Since African traders preferred to keep enslaved women, women represented only one third of the slaves transported to the Americas and they were victims of sexual assaults from the ships' crew (Painter 2007: 32-35). It is estimated that about 1.8 million Africans lost their lives during the Middle Passage (Rediker 2007: 5).

Slavery in the English colonies of North America escalated in the 1680s when the cost of importing slaves from Africa dropped and migration of indentured servants decreased (Elliott 2006: 104). Moreover, chattel slavery was more convenient than indentured servitude: slaves were a lifelong possession, they were cheaper to buy and to feed and they could ensure a stable supply of slaves through procreation. In the previous decades, several English colonies had passed laws to limit the possibilities of slaves to gain freedom, although slavery did not exist in English law (Elliott 2006: 103-107). Massachusetts was the first colony to legally recognize slavery in 1641 (Painter 2007: 36). In 1662, Virginia made slavery hereditary through the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which stated that children of enslaved women would inherit their legal status of slaves (Painter 2007: 62). Finally, since many African slaves would convert to Christianity to become free, in 1667 Virginia court ruled that Christians could be enslaved for life (Painter 2007: 49). Through these arrangements, colonists increasingly distinguished slaves of African ancestry from bound workers of other ethnicities: statutory slavery came to be defined by four characteristics, "lifetime status, *partus sequitur ventrem*, racial identification, and slave-as-chattel" (Wiecek 1977: 264).

Racial essentialism and the “scientific truth” of biologically determined human races were developed in the Age of Enlightenment and they were employed by English settlers to justify the institution of slavery (Painter 2007: 58). Southern colonies gradually established a racial system based on the opposition of whites and non-whites, arbitrarily lumping together people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds into the same category. This racial classification, known as the “one-drop rule”, created a clear line between people of European descent and people with any African ancestry, and perpetuated the myth of white purity and notions of white supremacy (Wald 2000: 14). To reinforce these strict social boundaries, interracial marriage and miscegenation were outlawed in 1691, although sexual relationships between European settlers and enslaved black women were tolerated. In this way, the institution of slavery “created a racial, class and gender system in colonial America that subordinated the slaves to their masters economically, sexually and legally” (Janiewski 1995: 138).

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, black men had already fought in several wars Great Britain waged in North America, such as the French and Indian War of 1754-1763. During the American War of Independence (1775-1783), they fought for both the British and the Continental Army. Inspired by the egalitarian ideals of the Revolution, black men from the Northern colonies joined the Continental Army, while those from the Southern colonies were more likely to side with the British. In fact, British officers took advantage of slaves’ discontent in the South and offered them freedom in exchange for enlistment. However, although African Americans fought alongside the Colonies in the War, their efforts were not recognized by the Founding Fathers when they drafted the Constitution in 1789, which failed to address the demand of freedom of nearly 700,000 people (Painter 2007: 73).

The first colony to ban slavery was Vermont, which declared its independence from the British Empire in 1777 and became a republic without joining the Union until 1791. By 1800, all Northern states had abolished slavery or arranged for its gradual elimination, as in the case of New York and New Jersey. However, in the following decades the enslaved population dramatically increased in the South. In spite of the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves passed by the government in 1807, slave ships still managed to illegally smuggle African captives in the South. Moreover, domestic slave trade within the borders was still allowed and *Partus sequitur ventrem* ensured a reliable

supply of slaves. Since the abolition of slavery in the South did not seem feasible in the near future, many slaves risked their lives in an attempt to escape towards free states or Canada. Runaway slaves were helped and supported by the Underground Railroad, a network of more than 3,000 people of all races who offered shelter to fugitive slaves (Painter 2007: 106). Although the number of fugitives did not threaten the economy of slave states, the government passed the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), which forced the free population to cooperate in the capture of fugitive slaves, even in those states where slavery was illegal. The Act was also intended to counteract the personal liberty laws of free states, which protected free blacks from being wrongly kidnapped and enslaved, and it denied a fair process to those accused of being runaway slaves (Finkelman 2011: 14).

The enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law polarized the debate around slavery and exacerbated political tensions between the North and the South. The victory of the Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln in the presidential elections of 1860 alarmed Southern slave owners, who feared that Lincoln's presidency would threaten the institution of slavery. As a result, South Carolina and ten other Southern states seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America. In truth, Lincoln, albeit being morally opposed to it, was never interested in ending slavery in the South as he knew that the federal government could not regulate slavery in those states where it was still legal (Finkelman 2011: 15). At the same time, he believed that, by seceding, Southern states were acting in violation of the Constitution. Despite Lincoln's pleas to remain in the Union, the Confederacy attacked Union forces at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, in April 1861, triggering the Civil War. In order to ensure the victory and therefore the preservation of the Union, in 1863 Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation with the aim of undermining the Confederacy's most valuable asset, that is, its enslaved workforce (Finkelman 2011: 17). He claimed that since Southern states were not part of the Union anymore, the Constitution did not apply to them and he could grant freedom to runaway slaves from the South, who were declared contrabands of war and could thus be captured and freed. Fugitive slaves and free blacks enlisted in the Union Army in great numbers. However, despite making up 11% of the number of Union soldiers, black men were paid significantly less than white servicemen and they could not emerge through the ranks and become officers because of anti-black sentiments within the army (Painter 2007: 125-128).

The Emancipation Proclamation did not affect slavery in the four slave states that had not seceded from the Union: there, the institution of slavery was still protected by the Constitution (Finkelman 2011: 17-18). After the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865, Congress passed three amendments to the Constitution, known as the Reconstruction Amendments, meant to expand the civil rights of Americans: the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in the whole nation; the Fourteenth Amendment granted American citizenship to former slaves; the Fifteenth Amendment extended voting rights to the African American male population.

After emancipation, African Americans “sought access to land, education, citizenship and mobility” (Janiewski 1995: 147). However, soon after the defeat of the Confederacy, former Confederate leaders returned to office within their states and passed a series of laws, known as Black Codes, designed to limit the newly gained freedom of former slaves. Black Codes allowed the establishment of the sharecropping system, under which landless farmers shared their profits with the owners of the land they worked (Painter 2007: 143). As a result, sharecropping families were often indebted to landowners. Southern blacks were met with opposition when they tried to take possession of farms and plantations confiscated to or abandoned by Confederates. By 1910, only one third of black farmers were landowners (Painter 2007: 145).

Another priority of emancipated blacks in the South was access to education. In the Antebellum period, Southern states passed anti-literacy laws to keep slaves uneducated and illiterate in order to prevent them from gaining freedom through forgery of documents. In 1860, the overwhelming majority of adult Southern blacks could not read nor write. After the war, Southern black communities saw schools and literacy as symbols of emancipation and invested more than a million dollars in their own education. By 1900, the percentage of illiterate African Americans decreased to 44.5% (Painter 2007: 147).

Anti-black violence rose in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before emancipation, “enslaved African Americans’ only protection against murder and injury was their value to their owners as property” (Painter 2007: 151), but after the Civil War they became more vulnerable to white supremacist attacks. Politically active African Americans were specifically targeted. Hundreds of black men had been elected to serve in Southern assemblies, but the Republican party soon lost its influence in the South as

white supremacist formed militias, such as the Ku Klux Klan founded in 1866, meant to intimidate black voters. To escape white supremacist terrorism, many African American families decided to migrate to the North and the West. In 1879, the Exoduster movement recorded the migration of roughly 6,000 African Americans from the South to Kansas (Painter 2007: 152). Others moved to the Republic of Liberia, in West Africa, with the support of the American Colonization Society. The colony of Liberia had been founded in 1822 by free African Americans as a safe haven for emancipated blacks and had declared its independency from the United States in 1847.

In 1883, the Supreme Court of the United States resolved that the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which guaranteed access to public spaces to all citizens regardless of their ethnicities, was unconstitutional (Senate, n.d.). A decade later, in 1896, in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the Supreme Court decided that racial segregation was not unconstitutional. These two decisions led to the establishment of the “separate but equal” legal doctrine, which allowed white supremacist to exclude African Americans from public life through racial segregation (Painter 2007: 154). Segregation policies, known as “Jim Crow” laws, limited African Americans’ access to education by banning them from spaces like schools, universities and libraries. In the following decades, the Supreme Court also enabled states’ assemblies to disenfranchise black men by reviewing their constitutions and adopting practices such as literacy tests and property qualifications to bar African American men from polling stations (Painter 2007:154).

White supremacist terrorism culminated in lynching. Black men accused of rape made up the overwhelming majority of lynching victims, who were tortured and killed slowly in front of a crowd of spectators. Lynching served the double purpose of punishing criminals, albeit without a fair trial, and intimidating the black population (Painter 2007: 181). From 1882 to 1968, more than 4,700 people fell victim to extralegal executions (Congress, n.d.). At the turn of the century, organizations such as the National Association of for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) were formed to carry out antilynching campaigns. Despite their pleas to protect African Americans’ lives, Congress failed to pass antilynching laws in multiple occasions: in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost 200 bills were submitted to Congress (Congress, n.d.). Lynching became a federal hate crime in 2022, with the

enactment of the Emmett Till Antilynching Act, named after the fourteen-year-old victim of a lynching execution in 1955.

## **1.2. An overview of African American women's history**

Studying black women's history requires an understanding of the notion of intersectionality, a term coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw. In an influential essay, Crenshaw points out how discourses around racism and sexism tend to focus on black men's and white women's struggles. As a consequence, women of color are marginalized from feminist theory as well as from anti-racist politics (Crenshaw 1989: 140). To describe black women's experiences of discrimination, Crenshaw employs the metaphor of an intersection:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (Crenshaw 1989: 149)

African American history provides multiple instances of what Crenshaw calls double-discrimination, that is, “the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex” (Crenshaw 1989: 149). Before emancipation, enslaved women were not only exploited for their labor, but they were also victims of sexual abuses on the part of slaveowners to ensure a stable supply of slaves (Janiewski 1995: 146). Moreover, harmful representations of black womanhood have always been pervasive in mainstream media and they have been instrumental in “the creation of dominant notions of white masculinity and femininity” (Berry, Gross 2020: 3). In this way, black womanhood, seen as deviant and inherently corrupt, has been juxtaposed with white womanhood, regarded as chaste and proper.

However, black women have historically been active participants in the process of democratization of the country, taking part in anti-slavery as well as feminist movements. In the Antebellum era, African American women who managed to escape slavery often joined anti-slavery societies, as in the case of Isabella Baumfree (c. 1797-1883), who bought her freedom in 1827 with the help of an abolitionist family. In 1843, Baumfree took the name Sojourner Truth and, in 1850, she published her autobiography, titled *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Truth toured the country advocating for abolition

and women's suffrage. In particular, she believed that black men and all women should simultaneously get the right to vote so that black women would not be subject to their husbands (Nodjimbadem 2020). Despite her wishes, the 15th Amendment of 1870 extended voting rights exclusively to black men. Women were finally allowed to express their vote in 1920, the year of the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which did not protect women of color from discrimination in the polling station (Nodjimbadem 2020). Disenfranchisement of all people of color ended with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which suppressed all those measures, such as literacy tests and poll taxes, that barred African American people from voting in the South (Britannica 2023a).

Black women came together in several civil rights organizations, such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), founded in 1896 by Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) and Ida B. Wells (1862-1931), among others. Tubman earned her nickname "Moses of her people" by rescuing hundreds of African Americans from slavery as part of the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, she collaborated with Union Army officials and coordinated spy operations in the Confederacy. Within a single raid, she led at least 750 slaves to freedom and destroyed more than thirty Southerners' properties (Berry, Gross 2020: 92-93). Wells was a Memphis-based journalist who started to investigate lynchings after three of her friends were murdered because of their successful grocery shop (Painter 2007: 181). She published her findings in her newspaper, the *Memphis Free Speech*, and in two pamphlets, *Southern Horrors* (1892) and *A Red Record* (1895). Her works fueled anti-lynching movements by shedding light into the true rationale behind lynching and uncovering that mob violence targeted African American men and women who defied white supremacy "whether by creating businesses that rivaled those of whites or failing to adhere to brute white passions" (Berry, Gross 2020: 108).

With more than fifty thousand members, the NACW pursued racial uplift campaigns on the local as well as on the national scale. It organized black suffragist movements and raised funds to support women of color and their children in local communities (Berry, Gross 2020: 109). NACW members were particularly concerned with deconstructing damaging stereotypes of black womanhood by adopting a moral code of respectability based on Christian values and ideals of purity and propriety (Berry, Gross 2020: 110). The NACW sought to forge positive representations of black

womanhood and, in doing so, it developed what Darlene Clark Hine names “culture of dissemblance”, that is, “the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” (Hine 1989: 912). Concealing their bodies and making themselves invisible was a way for black women to protect themselves from sexual exploitation and to redefine their sexuality.

More recently, Candice Jenkins has developed the concept of “salvific wish” to describe 19<sup>th</sup> century African American women’s adherence to traditional values, especially in regards to romance and family. Similarly to the culture of dissemblance, the salvific wish is a response to “the stigma of deviance that had been attached to African-American sexual identity” (Jenkins 2002: 974) that affected mainly middle-class black women to the point of developing “an aspiration [...] to save or rescue the black community from white accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety” (Jenkins 2002: 973).

### **1.3. The 1920s: The New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance**

The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been shaped by the mass migration of more than half a million African Americans from the rural South to Northern cities. This phenomenon climaxed after the United States entered World War I in 1917: black Southern families, eager to escape the constant threat of white supremacist violence, migrated northward to fill the vacancies caused by the departure of thousands of soldiers and by the temporary halt to migration of European workers (Painter 2007: 190). Anti-black violence spiked in the summer of 1919, when veterans, upon their return from Europe, found saturated job markets and lower wages and directed their rage and frustration towards black workers (Painter 2007: 199).

The Great Migration of 1916-1919 increased the African American population of New York City by 66% (Painter 2007: 191) and brought together black people, including talented professionals and intellectuals, from all different kinds of backgrounds to Harlem, transforming it into “a capital for the race, a platform from which the new black voice could be heard around the world, and an intellectual center of the New Negro” (Huggins 2007: 14). In the introduction to his anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), Alain Locke (1885-1954) describes the renewed positive attitude

of the “New Negro”, the outspoken post-World War I African American who strives for racial uplift. Because of its diverse and heterogeneous community, Harlem became “a laboratory of a great race-welding” (Locke 1925: 7), where African Americans could finally be bound by a “common consciousness” rather than by the “common condition” of slavery and segregation (Locke 1925: 7). Locke’s anthology, a collection of essays, poetry and stories on blackness, became the defining text of the New Negro movement and established him as “the father of the Harlem Renaissance” (Huggins 2007: 57).

The “renewed self-respect and self-dependance” (Locke 1925: 4) of this generation of African Americans led them to distance themselves from contemporary race leaders’ accommodating stances regarding segregation. Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), one of the most prominent spokespersons for the black race, was not perceived as radical enough by New Negro intellectuals, as he refused to openly oppose Jim Crow policies and address the emergency of anti-black violence. In order to challenge Washington’s leadership, black and white intellectuals, notably Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), gathered in 1909 and founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The following year, Du Bois was appointed director of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, which focused on the issues of lynching and violence against African Americans (Huggins 2007: 28).

Publications such as NAACP’s *The Crisis* and the National Urban League’s *Opportunity* had a central role in the flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, as they advertised the works of emerging black talents and often awarded literary prizes (Painter 2007: 206). Authors of the Harlem Renaissance were particularly concerned with subverting racial stereotypes (Hutchinson 2004: 50) and expressing pride for their racial identity (Painter 2007: 209). Novelists of this movement depicted “contemporary life and its social and cultural instability” (Hutchinson 2004: 50) and succeeded in transforming the meaning of the term “Negro novel”, which was previously employed to designate fiction about African Americans written by both black and white authors (Hutchinson 2004: 51). As Locke remarked, “In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination” (Locke 1925: 7) and, from then on, “Negro novel” came to exclusively describe fiction authored by African Americans writers, who could now represent blackness on their own terms.

While some Harlem Renaissance novelists chose to focus on the black urban middle-class in their works, others started to merge folk elements into their fiction in the wake of contemporary interest on primitivism. Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882-1961) and Nella Larsen's (1891-1964) novels feature mixed-race and middle-class heroines. On the contrary, authors such as Claude McKay (1889-1948), Langston Hughes (1901-1967) and Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) captivated the public by writing about the lower strata of society. For instance, McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), which featured "the apotheosis of the savage" (Huggins 2007: 125), was the first African American novel to become a bestseller (Andrews 1994: 103).

The Harlem Renaissance faltered in the 1930s due to the economic crisis caused by Wall Street Crash of 1929, but some of its authors, namely Hughes and Hurston, pursued their artistic ambitions and "adapted their core convictions to the new realities of the 1930s" (Andrews 1994: 6). In the second half of the century, the successes and achievements of the movement were questioned by critics as well as by its own authors, as is the case for Hughes, who struggled to believe that the general public's interest for black art could be long-lasting (Andrews 1994: 9). Critics such as Nathan Irvin Huggins accused Harlem authors of "cultural elitism", as they sought to bring together blacks and whites through elevated art and culture (Huggins 2007: 5). Despite such negative assessments on the accomplishments of the Harlem Renaissance as a whole, it is undeniable that the 1920s witnessed an unprecedented outpouring of black-authored literature, which "forced a serious reassessment of America's, not just black America's, notions about race, modern life, and the interrelationships between the two" (Andrews 1994: 10).

#### **1.4. Racial Passing in African American Literature**

Individuals of mixed ancestry, whose appearance defies racial classification, have appeared in both black and white-authored fiction under the guise of the stereotypical figure of the 'tragic mulatto', "the almost-white character whose beauty, intelligence, and purity are forever in conflict with the 'savage primitivism' inherited from his or her Negro ancestors" (Berzon 1978: 99). These stock figures have been historically characterized in feminine terms and, therefore, their fate is a consequence of their intrinsic femininity, which makes tragic mulattas both the victims and the agents of unfortunate events (Harper

1996: 104). Additionally, tragic mulattas' femininity poses a threat to social hierarchies, since they are often described as duplicitous women who seduce wealthy white men fascinated by their alluring beauty (Harper 1996: 106).

Similarly, the trope of passing for white has been featured in American literature to push a number of different agendas. Postbellum African American authors have appropriated this trope to "reinterpret race as a sociocultural construct, rather than a biological destiny, and to appropriate and deconstruct the oppressive, albeit elusive, notion of whiteness that served as the normative standard to identify and evaluate blackness" (Fabi 2004: 39). Novels such as *The House Behind the Cedars*, published by Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932) in 1900, challenge the supposed naturalness and fixity of social hierarchies. *The House Behind the Cedars* is narrated from the point of view of John Walden, a lawyer whose racial identity is not initially specified but is gradually revealed throughout the novel. Employing passing as a narrative strategy, Chesnutt "unequivocally undermines the reader's assumptions of the legibility of race" (Fabi 2001: 73). Moreover, by portraying a successful passer, Chesnutt calls attention to "the discrepancy between Walden's quintessentially American success story and the equally American tradition of racial prejudice that makes his success an aberration and a threat" (Fabi 2001: 81).

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) offers a parodic reinterpretation of the trope of passing in his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Published anonymously in 1912 and reprinted under Johnson's name in 1926, *The Autobiography* is a parody of previous novels of passing and their topoi, such as the protagonist's initial unawareness of their racial background and their attempts at reconnecting with their roots (Fabi 2001: 93), as well as an anticipation of the Harlem Renaissance writers' concerns with the psychological effects of passing on the mixed-race subject (Fabi 2001: 92-93). As a fictional autobiography, the novel provides a unique insight into the consciousness of a man who is torn between his desire to contribute to the uplift of the black race and the racial prejudices he was indoctrinated with as a child. Unlike traditional fictions of passing, Johnson "presents passing for white as the *result*, rather than the *cause*, of cultural alienation and divided racial loyalties" (Fabi 2001: 92). Throughout the novel, the Ex-Colored Man undergoes a series of metamorphoses in his attempts at recuperating a stable sense of identity (Fabi 2001: 95). In fact, upon discovering his African ancestry,

his racial as well as his gender identity go through a severe crisis, as he is characterized in feminine terms with respect not only to his appearance, but especially to his interiority (Harper 1996: 109). The protagonist's failure to conform to the standards of black masculinity, set by previous race leaders such as Frederick Douglass, results in his choice to pass for white indefinitely. The Ex-Colored Man comes to this decision when he witnesses the lynching of a black man. Unlike traditional race heroes who react to such episodes of anti-black violence with indignation and with a renewed commitment to the cause of racial uplift, the Ex-Colored Man's reaction to the lynching reveals "the most obvious symptom of the deep-seated white supremacist allegiances that beguile the Ex-Colored Man throughout the text" (Fabi 2001: 98), as he admires Southern whites' displays of power and feels shame for the humiliating murder of the black victim. Ultimately, his decision to join the community of the oppressors "thwarts his progress toward normative masculinity, since it sets him on a course whereby his social subjectivity is forever fixed in conventionally feminine terms" (Harper 1996: 112).

In her 1929 novel *Passing*, Nella Larsen "thematizes the clash between the narratives of American individualism and racial uplift notions of collective duty and race progress" (Wald 2000: 49). Larsen centers the novel around the reunion of two middle-class black women who pass for different purposes: Clare Kendry, married to a white man, has chosen to pass indefinitely, while Irene Redfield, who has built a family with her black husband, occasionally crosses the color line to bypass segregation. Unlike previous fictions of passing, Clare's desire for racial homecoming, rather than her ambition to pass, is the cause of the tension between the protagonists (Wald 2000: 47), as Irene perceives Clare as a threat to those middle-class values of propriety that are deemed necessary for race progress (Butler 1993: 177-178). In this sense, Clare embodies that kind of self-absorbed and evil femininity associated with the stereotypical tragic mulatta (Harper 1996: 114) and her death at the end of the novel epitomizes "the expulsion of the disruptive, evilly feminine force from its normative realm" (Harper 1996: 115).



## Chapter 2: Jessie Redmon Fauset and *Plum Bun*

### 2.1. The author

Jessie Redmon Fauset was born in 1882 in Fredericksville, New Jersey (now Lawnside, New Jersey), a town that had been founded by Quakers to welcome fugitive slaves. Fauset's family, urban and northern, had been free since before the Civil War (Wall 1995: 39). The Fausets moved to a white neighborhood in Philadelphia, where Reverend Redmon Fauset, a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, raised his children after the death of their mother. In Philadelphia, Jessie Fauset attended an academically competitive girls' high school, where she was the only black student, but discrimination on the basis of race denied her access to Bryn Mawr, an elite women's college (Wall 1995: 40). She moved to upstate New York to continue her education at Cornell University, where she focused on classical studies. In 1905, Fauset became the first African American woman to graduate from Cornell and to be accepted to the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa honor society (Johnson 1978: 150). Despite her impressive achievements, Fauset's career paths were extremely limited because of occupational segregation: teaching was one of the few ways for black women to financially support themselves. Fauset worked in two segregated high schools in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., alongside other African American women with equally outstanding academic qualifications, whose careers were hindered by discrimination (Wall 2007: 84). In 1914, she moved to France to attend summer courses at La Sorbonne, and in 1919 she earned a Master of Arts in Romance Languages at the University of Pennsylvania (Wall 1995: 45).

Fauset began her work within the NAACP's official magazine, *The Crisis*, in 1912. She had introduced herself to W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of *The Crisis*, in 1903 through a letter in which she appealed to him to find an employment (Wall 1995: 41). Fauset's earlier contributions to *The Crisis* were essays, reviews, short stories and poems (Johnson 1978: 145). In 1919, she became the literary editor of *The Crisis*: from this position, Fauset "helped establish a literary climate favorable to black writers of varying persuasions" (Johnson 1978: 145), publishing the early works of authors such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes. Her work as a literary editor was crucial to the flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance. In his memoir *The Big Sea*, Hughes placed her among those "who midwived the so-called New Negro Literature into being" (Hughes 1963: 218).

Deborah McDowell has commented on the choice of the term “midwife”, employed by Hughes:

Like midwives throughout history, Fauset played a role reserved for women – in particular, for those who failed to conform to their socially assigned roles as women. Midwifery has long been a controversial profession. Its devaluation in modern times has been directly proportionate to the growth of technology and the elevation of the medical profession as a sphere reserved for men. As a midwife to the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset played the now depreciated role of one who assists at a birth but is otherwise considered inessential to it. (McDowell 1991: 123)

Indeed, Fauset’s contributions to *The Crisis* and, by extension, to the Harlem Renaissance have been overlooked by scholars, who have focused on her literary works to lump her in the “Rear Guard” (Bone 1965: 97) of the movement together with other authors, such as Nella Larsen and W.E.B. DuBois. In *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert Bone includes in the Rear Guard those novelists who, according to him, pandered to a white audience by depicting respectable middle-class African Americans and suppressing racial differences (Bone 1965: 97). By contrast, Johnson argues that Fauset’s contributions to *The Crisis* appeal to a wider audience, as they deal with relevant issues within the African American community (Johnson 1978: 149). On the other hand, it was from her own life and experiences that Fauset drew material for her fictional works, in which she focused on “people positioned between two races because she often found herself in that situation” (Johnson 1978: 150).

Fauset wrote her debut novel, *There Is Confusion* (1924), in response to T.S. Stribling’s *Birthright* (1922), which recounts the tragic return of a black Harvard graduate to his hometown in the South (Wall 1995: 65). Fauset, in particular, was not impressed with the way Stribling, a white author, portrayed African American life nor with his assumption that mixed-race individuals’ nature is determined by the preponderance of either their white or black blood (Johnson 1978: 151). *There Is Confusion* centers on a group of four African American youths from Philadelphia who aspire to become professionals in their fields. In the novel, Fauset combines elements of different genres, such as the tragic mulatta myth, the *Kunsterroman* and the marriage plot, to expose “each genre’s inability to offer either helpfully idealized or accurate visions of African American lives” (Sheehan 2015: 140). Since its portrayal of black characters was not consistent with the general public’s assumptions on blackness, *There Is Confusion* was

turned down by one of the first publishers Fauset submitted it to: as she recalled, “White readers just don’t expect Negroes to be like this” (Johnson 1978: 152).

In 1926, Fauset left her role as literary editor of *The Crisis* without publicly stating the reasons behind her decision (Wall 1995: 72). In the following years, she went back to teaching to support herself while dedicating her summer vacations to writing fiction (Wall 1995: 73). She married Herbert E. Harris in 1929, at age forty-seven (Wall 1995: 78). In the same year, she published *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, and three years later *The Chinaberry Tree* (1932). Fauset’s retirement from the literary scene roughly coincides with the end of the Harlem Renaissance. Her last novel, *Comedy: American Style* (1933), appeared at a time of social instability aggravated by the Great Depression, and, as a result, the younger black generations were calling for innovative and unprecedented artistic expressions (Johnson 1978: 152-153).

Robert Bone’s assessments on her fiction, described as “sophomoric, trivial, and dull” (Bone 1965: 101), have shaped later scholars’ opinions on Fauset (Johnson 1978: 144). Ultimately, her focus on the black middle class was criticized by 1960s authors who saw the black bourgeoisie as an impediment to the establishment of an African American literature (Johnson 1978: 144). McDowell underlines that critics’ opinions on Fauset’s works have been influenced by erroneous assumptions on her background as an Old Philadelphian (McDowell 1991: 123), when, in reality, she was not born into wealth and she financially supported herself by teaching and writing. McDowell’s studies on Fauset have brought to light the progressive elements of Fauset’s fiction, which, in its conventional and conservative form, “challenged the irrationalities of the American attempt to classify races biologically and dramatized race as a cultural construct” (McDowell 1991: 134). In addition, McDowell calls attention to the fact that Fauset was exploring the overlap of sexism, racism and class discrimination several decades before third-wave feminism made this issue central to its agenda (McDowell 1985: ix).

## **2.2. The representation of racial passing in *Plum Bun***

Deborah McDowell has identified the passing plot and the marriage plot as the two main narrative threads within *Plum Bun*’s “richly-textured and ingeniously-designed narrative, comprised of plots within plots and texts within texts that cross refer to and comment upon one another in multiple and intricate combinations” (McDowell 1985: ix).

Moreover, as a “Black American *bildungsroman*” (Sylvander 1981: 188), *Plum Bun* focuses on racial differences, rather than class, as the societal impediment that the protagonist must recognize as a “false distinction of value to be overcome, ignored, and replaced” (Sylvander 1981: 188).

The novel is divided into five sections (“Home”, “Market”, “Plum Bun”, “Home Again” and “Market is Done”) whose titles refer to the nursery rhyme that appears in the epigraph:

To Market, To Market  
To buy a Plum Bun;  
Home again, Home again,  
Market is done.

The first section, “Home”, describes Angela’s early years in Philadelphia, the death of her parents and her decision to move to New York and pass for white; “Market” recounts Angela’s first months in New York; “Plum Bun” explores her liaison with white and wealthy Roger Fielding; the fourth section, “Home Again”, follows Angela’s efforts to create meaningful relationships with like-minded people after the end of her affair with Roger; in the final section, “Market Is Done”, Angela publicly reveals her racial identity and moves to Paris to pursue her career as an artist.

Behind Angela’s choice to pass is her conviction that her racial identity is the only thing that prevents her from enjoying the freedom she yearns for and that she associates with whiteness (Rottenberg 2013: 271). Angela has formed this association between whiteness and liberty, and consequently between blackness and constraint, during her childhood, when her white-passing mother, Mattie Murray, would bring her to shop and lunch in stores and restaurants barred to colored people. Mattie’s seemingly harmless occasional passing not only initiates Angela to “the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness” (Fauset 1985: 14), but it also legitimizes segregation and establishes a hierarchy within her home, so that “those who have less color have more privilege” (Allen 1998: 64), as her dark-skinned husband and younger daughter, Virginia, are excluded from Mattie and Angela’s activities.

After the death of her parents, Angela cuts ties with her sister and moves to New York City, which grants her not only anonymity, the *conditio sine qua non* for passing, but also countless opportunities that were previously denied to her as a black woman (Rottenberg 2013: 271). In this sense, Angela’s passing, similarly to Mattie’s, is driven

by materialistic purposes, as “her goal is to occupy whichever identity will maximize her positive life experiences” (Phipps 2016: 233). Although it allows her to escape racism, New York’s heterogeneity quickly leads Angela to experience alienation and estrangement, which she initially mistakes for freedom and independence (Pfeiffer 2001: 87). Having left her Philadelphian community and her sister to enter “an undifferentiated mass society” (Pfeiffer 2001:87), Angela is unable to establish a sense of identity. Her struggle is further aggravated by the cultural instability of the interwar period (Pfeiffer 2001: 81), marked by the shift “from community to individualism, from nineteenth-century values to twentieth-century promises” (Pfeiffer 2001: 82).

As a “quintessentially American individualist” (Pfeiffer 2001: 81), Angela’s thirst for independence clashes with the middle-class values her parents fostered and her darker sister, Virginia, holds onto. In one pivotal scene, Angela reveals the sacrifices she is willing to make in order to protect her new identity and fulfil her ambition of marrying Roger Fielding, a white man, and abandons Virginia at the train station when Roger unexpectedly makes an appearance. The stark contrast between Angela’s individualism and Virginia’s embrace of Victorian values underlines how both attitudes prevent them from building a stable identity (Pfeiffer 2001: 90): after Angela’s betrayal, Virginia is left alone to navigate her new life in New York.

Angela’s “lonely, directionless stasis” (Tomlinson 2002: 92) and “loss of subjectivity” (Pfeiffer 2001: 87), as well as her relationship with Roger, make her unable to focus on the artistic goals she has moved to New York to pursue. However, after the end of her liaison with Roger, Angela finds a way to support herself through her art and is eventually awarded a scholarship to study in Paris. Grown as individual and empowered by her work as an artist, Angela finally reveals her African ancestry to advocate for a fellow black student, Miss Powell, who is being denied the scholarship she has rightfully won because of racial discrimination. Angela’s scholarship is revoked as a consequence of her confession, but she is still able to travel to Paris thanks to the support of her friends.

Angela’s renunciation of her white persona allows her to understand the true value of freedom, which lies in “meaningful connection with others” (Pfeiffer 2001: 90). Alienated from her sister, mingling with Roger and other shallow acquaintances, and neglecting her art, for most of the novel Angela is unable to create a fulfilling sense of self. In the last two sections of *Plum Bun*, Angela, reunited with her sister and associated

with like-minded people, focuses on her artistic pursuits and discovers that her art “permits her to uncover and enhance the self that already existed” (Pfeiffer 200: 91).

Ultimately, the passing plot and other sentimental conventions are exploited by Fauset to brilliantly disguise her true concerns. Marginalized authors, like Fauset, have mastered the use of “literary and social conventions that function as masks behind which lie decidedly unconventional critiques” (McDowell 1991: 134). *Plum Bun*’s genteel and traditional guise conceals Fauset’s explorations on “the unequal power relationships in American society” (McDowell 1985: xi), as well as her critiques of the act of passing (McDowell 1991: 134) and of societal norms of womanhood upheld by romance fiction (McDowell 1985: x).

### **2.3. The representation of womanhood and female sexuality in *Plum Bun***

Published at a time of great social upheaval, *Plum Bun* records the changing role of women within American cities. The turn of the century witnessed the emergence of a new ideal of womanhood, as women began to attend institutions of higher education and entered “the public sphere through political participation and expanded presence in the workplace” (Maloni 2009: 880). Brought about by the economic and social changes of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Maloni 2009: 886), namely industrialization and women’s enfranchisement, the New Woman movement challenged middle-class Victorian ideals of domesticity and encouraged women to cross over the boundaries of traditional womanhood.

In *Plum Bun*, Angela’s disenchantment with the “small, closed, rigidly restricted domestic sphere which represented, just one generation earlier, the epitome of comfort and success” (Pfeiffer 2001: 82) is juxtaposed with Virginia’s espousal of the ideology of domesticity. The opposition between Angela and Virginia’s aspirations, independence on one side and family life on the other, mirrors the tension between New Womanhood and Victorian Womanhood in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For an individualist like Angela, “the values by which America had been governed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were no longer compelling in the 20<sup>th</sup>” (Maloni 2009: 885). As a consequence, Angela is pulled to New York not only to elude racial segregation, but also to break away from traditional gender roles (Rottenberg 2013: 270).

Angela's decision to pass and, later, her obsessive research of a wealthy white partner to marry are driven by her desire to gain access to the power she is denied as a black woman. As "naïve, fantasy-ridden attempts by blacks and women to avoid the structural inequalities that disempower them" (McDowell 1985: xi), the tropes of passing and marriage allow Fauset to explore "the forms and sources of power, which are gender, race-, and class-specific" (McDowell 1991: 132). Indeed, Angela sets her mind on pursuing a relationship with a white man once she realizes that posing as a white woman does not grant her the lifestyle she covets:

"If I were a man," she said, "I could be president," and laughed at herself for the "if" itself proclaimed a limitation. But that inconsistency bothered her little; she did not want to be a man. Power, greatness, authority, these were fitting and proper for men; but there were sweeter, more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too. Such a power she would like to exert in this glittering new world, so full of mysteries and promise. If she could afford it she would have a salon, a drawing-room where men and women, not necessarily great, but real, alive, free and untrammelled in manner and thought, should come and pour themselves out to her sympathy and magnetism. To accomplish this she must have money and influence; indeed since she was so young she would need even protection; perhaps it would be better to marry . . . a white man. The thought came to her suddenly out of the void; she had never thought of this possibility before. If she were to do this, do it suitably, then all that richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved would be doubly hers. "She knew that men had a better time of it than women, coloured men than coloured women, white men than white women. Not that she envied them. Only it would be fun, great fun to capture power and protection in addition to the freedom and independence which she had so long coveted and which now lay in her hand. (Fauset 1985: 88-89)

Angela's entry to New York's marriage market is determined by her assumption that "only dependence will yield independence" (Pfeiffer 2001: 89). Although escaping gender roles was one of the motives behind her removal from Philadelphia, Angela is "still profoundly influenced by dominant gender norms and yearn[s] for the social approbation that marriage affords" (Rottenberg 2013: 274) as she tries to emulate the New Woman lifestyle. When her affair with Roger is in a stalemate, Angela seeks advice from her friend Martha Burden, who reveals to her the ins and outs of the marriage market:

It is a game, and the hardest game in the world for a woman, but the most fascinating; the hardest in which to strike a happy medium. You see, you have to be careful not to withhold too much and yet to give very little. If we don't give enough we lose them. If we give too much we lose ourselves. (Fauset 1985: 145)

As McDowell remarks, Angela and Roger have entered the marriage market with different objectives: while she is pursuing "power and influence attainable only through

marriage to a wealthy white man” (McDowell 1985: xiv), he is lusting for sex, “a consumable to be bought, used up, and expended” (McDowell 1985: xiv). In addition, Roger himself is ironically not free from constraints: he depends on the will of his father, who would disinherit his son if he married a woman below his social class. As a result, rather than marriage, Roger offers to Angela “a friendship in which two people would have every claim in the world upon each other and yet no claim” (Fauset 1985: 192). Since she identifies as a middle-class black woman (Rottenberg 2013: 277), Angela is torn between her own undeniable “thoughts and longings” (Fauset 1985: 200) and “all the training which she had ever received” (Fauset 1985: 199). She is unable to rid herself of the notions of respectability and propriety that she has assimilated during her upbringing in “a community in which what Jenkins identifies as the salvific wish shaped perceptions of acceptable sexual intimacy” (Rottenberg 2013: 277). In spite of that, she surrenders to her sexual desire, sleeps with Roger and develops an intense feeling of possessiveness to the point that “her whole life was hanging on the words, the moods, the actions of someone else” (Fauset 1985: 211). By contrast, Roger grows distant and aloof. His coldness allows Angela to further grasp the “apparently unbridgeable difference between the sexes” (Fauset 1985: 229): when he reproaches her for reaching out to him, despite him frequently calling her, she notices the hypocrisy of his double standards and observes that “everything was for men, but even the slightest privilege was to be denied to a woman unless the man chose to grant it” (Fauset 1985: 229). Their loveless relationship comes to an end with Angela preserving her independence, first by refusing the money and the apartment he was offering her to become his mistress, and later by rejecting his marriage proposal when he predictably returns (Sylvander 1981: 182).

Up until this point, the narrative has been dominated by a fairy-tale motif, which wears off in the last two sections of the novel (Sylvander 1981: 185-6). Angela’s ambition “to beg, borrow, or steal for herself the happily-ever-after fantasy marriage of which fairy tales are made” (duCille 1993: 435) had been nurtured by the tales of her parents’ perfect love story. However, the outcome of her affair with Roger opens her eyes to the hypocritical social conventions that regulate relationships between men and women, although it does not discourage her obsession with marriage nor her patterns of dependency (McDowell 1985: xv). Accordingly, she turns to Anthony Cross, a fellow penniless art student, who cannot commit himself to Angela as he is already engaged to

another woman, who is later revealed to be Virginia. In a dramatic turn of events, Anthony and Virginia break off their engagement and he uncovers his own mixed ancestry. At the end of the novel, Angela, who has successfully completed her process of self-definition and has become self-sufficient thanks to her work as an artist, is “sick of playing games with human relationships” (Fauset 1985: 321-322) and is ready to enter a marriage with Anthony:

Racial and sexual and monetary conventions and rules and deceits were the bonds that bound young Angela Murray. During the course of *Plum Bun* they unobtrusively disintegrate to be replaced by hard work, independence of thought, honesty in human relationships. (Sylvander 1981: 189)

Anthony’s arrival in Paris on Christmas Day, sent as a gift by Virginia and her fiancé to reunite with Angela, is “a reward for Angela’s suffering and her exertions” (Condé 1994: 101). Her experiences have further shaped her view on marriage: while she still regards it as “the most desirable and natural end” (Fauset 1985: 274) for a woman, she has stopped seeing it as the means to achieve the lifestyle she used to crave. She now believes that, with the support of a suitable match, “an ambitious woman might reach forth and acquit herself well in any activity” (Fauset 1985: 274), as long as she is “able to say, as did men, «You are mine,» not merely, «I am yours»” (Fauset 1985: 275).

As an exploration of the changing role of women in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Plum Bun* features several female characters who are negotiating their place within American society. It is significant that the women of *Plum Bun* have all migrated from the suburbs or from another city to New York to pursue new possibilities and try to live by the ideals of the New Woman movement. Upon her arrival in New York, Angela divides her time between bohemian Greenwich Village and Fourteenth Street, an area specifically associated with the New Woman (Tomlinson 2002: 92). At her art school, she becomes friends with “two people of markedly independent methods of thought and actions” (Fauset 1985: 207), Martha Burden and Paulette Lister. Martha financially sustains herself through her work as a caricaturist and has challenged dominant norms of propriety by living with her partner for two years before marrying him without taking his surname (Rottenberg 2013: 273). The portrayal of Paulette allows Fauset to “explore female sexual autonomy with fewer political ramifications than in Angela’s depiction” (Tomlinson 2002: 92). Paulette, “a remarkable personage, a woman apart” (Fauset 1985: 275) is the embodiment of the urbane New Woman who explores her sexuality with

multiple partners outside of the normative boundaries of marriage. It is not only in her intimate life that Paulette challenges gender roles, as she conducts herself like a man “without losing claim to her femininity” (Rottenberg 2013: 274) and is described in androgynous terms (Tomlinson 2002: 95). When Angela points out the contrast between Paulette’s masculine attitude and her feminine appearance, Paulette replies:

There is a great deal of the man about me. I’ve learned that a woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants. I’ve made a philosophy of it. I see what I want; I use my wiles as a woman to get it, and employ the qualities of men, tenacity and ruthlessness, to keep it. And when I’m through with it, I throw it away just as they do. Consequently I have no regrets and no encumbrances. (Fauset 1985: 105)

Paulette is able to “conduct [herself] absolutely according to [her] own laws” (Fauset 1985: 107) because of the privilege inherent in her whiteness and in her social status. Indeed, Paulette shuns marriage, while, as Angela observes, “for most women there must be the safety, the assurance of relationship that marriage affords” (Fauset 1985: 275).

Through the juxtaposition of liberated white women like Paulette Lister and Martha Burden and marginalized women like Virginia and Rachel Salting, *Plum Bun* explores the qualitative difference of the city’s emancipatory potential for white middle-class women and minority women (Rottenberg 2013: 278). In doing so, the narrative makes clear that “gender norms are always already racialized and, conversely, that racial norms are always already gendered” (Rottenberg 2013: 267). Particularly, marginalized women who are seeking to escape patriarchal control struggle to shake off the “psychic effects or force of dominant norms” (Rottenberg 2013: 276). The tension between one’s past and their desires is particularly evident in Rachel Salting’s case. “A curious mixture of Jewish conservatism and modernity” (Fauset 1985: 211), Rachel has cut ties with her Orthodox Jewish family and is engaged to a Catholic man. Eventually, she calls off the engagement to her fiancé for fear that her father may curse her, were she to marry someone outside of her faith. Rachel’s decision proves that living in a metropolis does not automatically liberate women from “the psychic force of primary racial or ethnic identifications [...] and the influence of dominant norms within one’s own community” (Rottenberg 2013: 276).

Lastly, *Plum Bun* foregrounds “the racialized nature of the New Woman and presents the New Negro Woman as her *urban* racial counterpart” (Rottenberg 2013: 279) by drawing a parallel between Angela and Virginia’s experiences in New York. Despite

a deep attachment to her Philadelphian community and the ideology of domesticity it fostered, Virginia is drawn to New York because the city grants more opportunities to black female professionals (Rottenberg 2013: 279). After being abandoned by her sister at the train station, Virginia establishes a meaningful connection with Harlem's stimulating and vibrant African American community. By the end of the novel, Virginia has undergone a radical metamorphosis: she has set aside her identification with "her parents' old-fashioned, sentimental, and parochial traditions" (Pfeiffer 2001: 82) to become the epitome of the New Negro Woman (Rottenberg 2013: 279). As such, she is an active participant in public life and in the effort for racial uplift but, unlike the white New Woman ideal, she values sexual propriety (Rottenberg 2013: 280). Indeed, since "the black female body has so often been characterized as the sole source of black intimate or domestic irregularity" (Jenkins 2002: 973), middle-class black women were encouraged to conceal their sexuality to counter the allegations of sexual misconduct that targeted the whole African American community.

In 1920s New York City, both white and black women were fighting for the right to define their sexuality on their own terms, "the one as sexually autonomous, the other as potentially chaste, neither as sexually objectified" (Tomlinson 2002: 96-97). By portraying representatives of both the New Woman and the New Negro Woman movement, *Plum Bun* records "two conflicting feminist projects whose shared aim is a woman's control over her body and her destiny" (Tomlinson 2002: 97).



## **Chapter 3: *Plum Bun* and *The Vanishing Half***

### **3.1. African American history of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The Great Depression, caused by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, severely affected the African American population, both in the cities and in the rural South. By 1932, more than a quarter of the total active population of the nation was unemployed, while half or more of black laborers was out of work (Painter 2007: 217). Their condition was further aggravated by the ongoing discrimination and racial segregation. In the hopes of overturning the precarious situation of disenfranchised Southern blacks, Northern black voters abandoned their historical allegiance to the Republican party to flock to the Democratic party in the elections of 1936 (Painter 2007: 218). In his first presidential term, the Democrat president Franklin D. Roosevelt had enacted the New Deal, a series of laws and policies designed to promote economic recovery. The New Deal greatly benefitted African Americans, as it granted workers the right to unionize (Painter 2007: 223). Unions tackled several key issues for black workers and successfully raised their wages, denounced unfair treatment in the workplace and helped them exercise their voting rights (Painter 2007: 223). However, it must be noted that “the greatest shortcoming of the New Deal was its failure to link inextricably the principle of federal auspices of racial equality with the concept of a desegregated society” (Ross 1975: 2). In fact, New Deal policies tended to reinforce the “oppressive racial status quo” (Painter 2007: 224) rather than challenging it. For example, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) aimed at raising prices and decreasing farm production by paying farmers for curtailing their crops (Britannica 2023b). Inevitably, the AAA ended up favoring wealthy landowners who would keep the subsidies and lay off the poor sharecroppers and tenants who worked their lands (Painter 2007: 224). Not satisfied with the New Deal’s failure to tackle racial injustice, in 1936 John Davis (ca. 1905-1973), Ralph Bunche (1904-1971) and Asa Philip Randolph (1889-1979) founded the National Negro Congress (NNC), a radical organization that focused on the needs and demands of working-class blacks (Painter 2007: 229). In contrast with the NAACP, now deemed too conservative, the NNC included racial issues as well as class interests in its agenda (Painter 2007: 229).

In these years of crisis, African Americans began working within a presidential administration for the first time. Roosevelt administration introduced, within the National Youth Administration (NYA), a Division of Negro Affairs, led by Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), who created the Federal Council on Negro Affairs, known as the “Black Cabinet” in 1936 (Painter 2007: 229). Meant to advise President Roosevelt on African American issues, the Black Cabinet included more than thirty black intellectuals, among which sociologist Robert Weaver (1907-1997), who became the first African American to occupy a position within a presidential cabinet in 1964, when he began serving as secretary of Housing and Urban Development during Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency (Painter 2007: 229).

The Second World War dredged up the same issues of the previous wars the United States had waged, such as the Civil War and the First World War. African American soldiers were once again prevented from reaching higher positions within the army as well as from exercising their rights after having defended the nation from its enemies (Painter 2007: 239). However, for the first time in its history, the U.S. government took a stance against employment discrimination by creating a Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) in 1941, under the pressures of Asa Philip Randolph, who announced that he would lead a protest march of 100,000 African Americans on Washington unless the government implemented fair employment practices in defense industries and desegregated the army (Painter 2007: 240-241). After president Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 8802 banning discriminatory employment practices in war-related fields and establishing the FEPC, Randolph called off the march (National Archives 2022a). Since Roosevelt’s Executive Order had failed in its purpose of desegregating the army, his successor Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 in 1948, banning segregation in the Armed Forces (National Archives 2022b).

In 1946, the NNC and the NAACP submitted two petitions to the recently-formed United Nations (UN) to denounce the countless violations of African Americans’ human rights, among which lynching and inadequate public services for black people in the United States (Painter 2007: 251-252). The UN never addressed neither of the two petitions, but in 1946 Democratic president Truman established a Committee on Civil Rights to examine the status of civil rights in the nation (Painter 2007: 253). *To Secure These Rights*, the report drafted by the committee in 1947, shed light on the social

injustices of segregation and “spelled out the moral, economic, and international reasons why the government must act; and recommended the end of discrimination and segregation in public education, employment, housing, the military, public accommodations, and interstate transportation” (Sitkoff 1971: 600). Despite describing the document as “an American charter of human freedom” (Sitkoff 1971: 601), Truman never fully implemented the measures suggested by the Committee for fear of alienating the white South (Sitkoff 1971: 601). In a special message to Capitol Hill, he urged Congress to abolish the poll tax and declare lynching a federal crime, but, on the other hand, he refused to deny federal grants to the states that practiced discrimination (Sitkoff 1971: 600-601).

In the following years, the battle for black civil rights was hampered by anti-communist sentiments fueled by the Cold War. Conservative Southern Democrats managed to stifle congressional initiatives aimed at extending civil rights to the black community by employing the tactic of red-baiting, that is accusing activists and organizations of being Communists (Painter 2007: 253-254). While Communists made up a large portion of the NNC, the more conservative NAACP expelled its Communist members to counter these allegations (Painter 2007: 254). Ultimately, the Cold War years proved to be “a repressive as well as a promising time” (Painter 2007: 254), as the United States government started to uphold black civil rights to respond to the accusations coming from the Soviet Union, that claimed that the United States were not a truly democratic nation (Painter 2007: 254).

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional and partially reversed the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896 (United States Courts: n.d.). Immediately after the Court’s decision, Southern white supremacists organized themselves in White Citizen Councils to put up a “massive resistance” to desegregation (Painter 2007: 266). In the major cities across the country, the creation of all-white suburbs was promoted by federal policies that granted mortgages to white families and discouraged them from relocating to “high risk” areas, namely black and poor neighborhoods where buyers could not get loans to buy property (Painter 2007: 269). This practice, known as “redlining”, was based on the assumption that “the presence of any population of Black residents was a sign of impending property value decline” (Jackson 2021) and that, consequently, investments in

“high-risk” areas were too hazardous. In addition, racially-motivated crimes against African Americans, as in the case of the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, remained unpunished as their perpetrators were tried by all-white juries (Painter 2007: 267).

With its nonviolent resistance to white supremacist oppression, the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 laid the foundations of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s (Painter 2007: 272). In Montgomery, Alabama, students of the historically black Alabama State University had already boycotted buses in the spring of 1954 to protest against the harassment suffered by black riders who were forced to sit in the back of the bus and give up their seats to white people (Painter 2007: 271). Montgomery’s black community resumed their boycott the following year, on December 1, 1955, when civil rights activist Rosa Parks (1913-2005) was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man (Painter 2007: 271). On December 5, 1955, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) delivered a speech at a mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church to endorse nonviolent protests (Painter 2007: 271):

And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie. Love has no meaning. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (King 1955)

The boycott ended on December 21, 1956, after the implementation of the Supreme Court’s *Browder v. Gayle* decision, which acknowledged segregation in transportation as unconstitutional (Painter 2007: 272). The Montgomery Bus Boycott thus catalyzed the desegregation of public transportation and brought to fame Martin Luther King, Jr., who would become the leader of the Civil Rights movement of the following decade.

The 1950s also witnessed the rise of the Nation of Islam (NOI), a controversial religious movement founded in Detroit in the 1930s by W.D. Fard Muhammad (1893-?) and led by his successor Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975) (Curtis 2021: 658-659). The NOI encouraged the African American community to give up their Christian beliefs, which, they believed, “had bound them in both physical and mental chains” (Curtis 2021: 658), and to embrace Islam, which they deemed the original religion of black people (Curtis 2021: 658). In contrast with race leaders who advocated for desegregation and

integration, Elijah Muhammad promoted religious and political separatism (Curtis 2021: 658). NOI members were trained to be able to defend themselves against white-supremacist attacks, but they were instructed not to initiate violence (Painter 2007: 277). In the 1950s, the most notorious spokesperson for the NOI was Malcolm Little (1925-1965), who, after converting to Islam and meeting Muhammad, changed his surname to “X” to signal African Americans’ lack of knowledge of their origins due to centuries of forced migration from Africa and slavery. In the 1960s, Malcolm X grew progressively distant from Elijah Muhammad and his stances against the Civil Rights movement and was eventually suspended from the Nation of Islam (Painter 2007: 301). Rather than supporting the NOI’s separatist projects, Malcolm X started to advocate for human rights for people of African descent worldwide (Painter 2007: 301). After converting to Sunnī Islam and changing his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, he founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity (Curtis 2021: 661). In February 1965, Shabazz was shot to death in front of a crowd in Harlem and two members of the NOI were convicted for his assassination (Painter 2007: 301).

In 1963, a hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Asa Philip Randolph organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, whose goals were detailed in *The New York Times* and included, among others, “a comprehensive civil rights bill”, “desegregation of all public schools” and “a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination in all employment” (“Goals of Rights March” 1963). On August 28, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his historic speech “I Have a Dream” in front of a quarter of a million people gathered on the National Mall (Painter 2007: 295).

In 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson carried on the project of former President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who, before being assassinated in 1963, had committed to drafting a civil rights bill, and urged Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act “as a monument to Kennedy” (Aiken, Salmon and Hanges 2013: 388). The Act desegregated public facilities and outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, or national origin (Painter 2007: 303). Despite being the most comprehensive piece of legislation on civil rights since the Reconstruction era, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 failed to specifically address the issue of police brutality as well as the literacy tests that barred many Southern African Americans from casting their votes (Painter 2007: 303). In the wake of the outbreaks of violence in Selma, Alabama, where marchers protested in

support of the registration of eligible black voters, President Johnson pushed for a law designed to protect voting rights (Painter 2007: 303). The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed the implementation of “barriers to voting and provided for greater enforcement of the right to vote guaranteed by the Fourteenth and the Fifteenth Amendments” (Schuit and Rogowski 2017: 513).

After the legal basis of segregation had been dismantled by the Civil Rights act and the Voting Rights Act, the nation continued to be devastated by riots in the second half of the 1960s as African Americans took to the streets to express their exasperation with the ongoing issues of police brutality, deindustrialization and suburbanization (Painter 2007: 312). Deindustrialization aggravated poverty in the cities, which, along with the creation of white and well-functioning suburbs, resulted in the decay of urban public services, such as schools and garbage collection (Painter 2007:309). In addition, in April 1968, bursts of violence in more than 125 cities followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Painter 2007: 308), which shattered activists’ faith in nonviolent protests and in the democratic values of the nation (Painter 2007: 317).

Ultimately, younger black activists felt that, although the Civil Rights movement’s nonviolent approach led to the enactment of anti-discrimination and anti-segregation legislations, it failed in making a significant improvement in black people’s lives (Painter 2007: 319). Inspired by Malcolm X’s belief in self-defense, a new movement, Black Power, encouraged African Americans to look inwards and appreciate the value of their identity, rather than perceiving themselves as a problem (Painter 2007: 318). The pillars of Black Power were, accordingly, self-definition and self-defense. Self-definition entailed reclaiming black history and black culture, and inspired African Americans to express their displeasure with dominant perceptions of blackness:

There is a growing resentment of the word “Negro,” for example, because this term is the invention of our oppressor; it is *his* image of us that he describes. Many blacks are now calling themselves African-Americans, Afro-Americans or black people because that is *our* image of ourselves. When we begin to define our own image, the stereotypes – that is, lies – that our oppressor has developed will begin in the white community and end there. The black community will have a positive image of itself that *it* has created. This means we will no longer call ourselves lazy, apathetic, dumb, good-timers, shiftless, etc. Those are words used by white America to define us. If we accept those adjectives, as some of us have in the past, then we see ourselves in a negative way, precisely the way white America wants us to see ourselves. (Carmicheal and Hamilton 1967: 37-38)

In 1966, students Bobby Seale (b. 1936) and Huey P. Newton (1942-1989) founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) in Oakland, California (Painter 2007: 321).

Seale and Newton were “committed to the gaining of justice for black people that white policemen often failed to provide” (Harris 2001: 412) and considered arm bearing a right (Harris 2001: 413). To protect black citizens from police brutality, the BPP patrolled the streets of Oakland “to assure that constitutional rights were not violated” (Harris 2011: 414) during police checks. The BPP’s activities effectively decreased the frequency of police brutality against blacks, but, at the same time, they led to violent confrontations with the police (Harris 2001: 414). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the BPP began to tackle other issues besides that of police brutality and created free breakfast programs, free medical and dental clinics and freedom schools (Painter 2007: 323). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) exploited the BPP’s internal strife and its rivalry with other organizations to destroy the Party, which collapsed in 1974 (Harris 2001: 416-417).

A former member of the Black Panther Party, Angela Davis (b. 1944) has investigated the phenomenon of mass incarceration and the concept of the “prison industrial complex”, which highlights how “the proliferation of prisons and prisoners is more clearly linked to larger economic and political structures and ideologies than to individual criminal conduct and efforts to curb “crime”” (Davis and Shaylor 2001: 2). In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the American prison population has grown exponentially, with African Americans and Hispanics representing 56% of the incarcerated (NAACP, n.d.). Davis remarks that the increasing incarceration of men as well as women of color is caused by the “war on drugs” (Davis and Shaylor 2001: 6), that “criminalized the nonviolent possession of illegal drugs and imposed mandatory prison sentences for drug possession” (Painter 2007: 386-387). The ever-growing numbers of the African American inmate population influences politics, since convicted felons lose their right to vote temporarily or, in 14 U.S. states, permanently (Painter 2007: 384).

The 2010s saw the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, which originated and spread on social media. Following the acquittal of the murderer of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012, Alicia Garza wrote a Facebook status expressing her feelings and ended it with “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.” Garza’s friend, Patrisse Cullors, left a comment, “#blacklivesmatter”, under her post. The hashtag quickly went viral and prompted Garza, Cullors and their friend, Opal Tometi, to form the project Black Lives Matter (BLM) in 2013 (Arnold 2017: 9). BLM has been founded “to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on

Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, n.d.) and has been instrumental in “[bringing] police reform efforts into mainstream awareness, resulting in increased political pressure” (Arnold 2017: 12). The movement has gained worldwide recognition in summer 2020, after the death of George Floyd, killed by a police officer who pinned him to the ground for over nine minutes despite Floyd repeating that he could not breathe. Protests following George Floyd’s murder started in Minneapolis and spread throughout the nation calling for the defunding of police (Burch, Harmon, Tavernise and Badger 2023).

### **3.2. *The Vanishing Half*: a contemporary novel of passing**

Published amid the Black Lives Matter protests of June 2020, *The Vanishing Half* is the sophomore novel of Brit Bennett, a Southern Californian author whose debut novel, *The Mothers* (2016), already attracted widespread critical praise. Included in former President Barack Obama’s list of favorite books of 2020, *The Vanishing Half* is a family saga that follows a set of African American twin sisters, Stella and Desiree Vignes, who decide to live on the opposite sides of the color line, and their daughters, Kennedy Sanders and Jude Winston, who have to come to terms with the decisions their mothers made. Adopting an omniscient narrator, a nonlinear narrative structure, multiperspectivity and analepses, Bennett is able to gradually unfold the interwoven lives of the characters, from the Deep South to the East and the West Coast spanning from the 1940s to the 1990s.

*The Vanishing Half* is divided into six sections. The first section, “The Lost Twins”, is set in 1968 and recounts Desiree’s return to her hometown along with her dark-skinned daughter, Jude, and her reunion with her mother, Adele, and a past lover, Early Jones. The next section, “Maps”, follows Jude’s first years at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1978, where she begins a relationship with a trans man, Reese. The events of the third section of the novel, “Heartlines”, take place at the same time as those of the first section, in April 1968. The reader is finally introduced to Stella’s point of view, as she lives her life as a white woman in Los Angeles with her husband and their daughter, Kennedy. In the fourth section, “The Stage Door”, set in 1982, Jude meets Kennedy, eventually confronts Stella and reveals to Kennedy her mother’s origins. In “Pacific Cove”, Kennedy and Jude meet again in New York, sparking once again Kennedy’s curiosity about her mother’s past, but Stella shuts her down every time she

brings up the topic. In the last section, “Places”, Stella returns to Mallard in 1986 to ask Desiree to tell her daughter to stop approaching Kennedy. After reuniting with her twin sister, Stella decides to reveal the truth to Kennedy, but she continues to pass for white.

The novel opens in April 1968 with Desiree Vignes’s return to Mallard, which arouses the curiosity of the small community from which she had escaped fourteen years before with her sister. Mallard is a color struck town, inhabited by light-skinned African Americans who “would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes” (Bennett 2020a: 6). Bennett has revealed that she drew inspiration for Mallard from her mother’s stories about a town in Louisiana whose African American community would employ the practice of intermarriage so that the younger generations would get progressively lighter (George 2020):

It struck me because I had always thought about colorism as interpersonal or systemic, but I never really thought of locating it within a specific town — that the view that light skin is preferable to dark skin could be instituted within a town, and that the town would be so invested in light skin that they would be striving toward genetically engineering their population to get lighter. There was something so strange and really striking about the implications of that. If that’s the core value of your town, that’s going to affect not only how you think about your body, and how you think about other people’s bodies, but also who you marry and your kids. (Bennett 2020b)

Mallard’s obsession with light skin fails to protect its citizens from the senseless ferocity of white supremacy. During their childhood, Stella and Desiree witness the lynching of their father, an act of violence whose senselessness “leads them to splinter in different ways” (Bennett 2020c). As the twins hide in a closet and watch a mob of white men beat their father, “something shifted between them in that moment” (Bennett 2020a: 37). While Desiree accepts the illogicality of the violence, Stella craves logical answers:

“But what did Daddy do?” Stella kept asking.  
Desiree sighed, for the first time feeling the burden of having to supply answers. (...)  
“Like Willie Lee say. He do his job too good.”  
“But that don’t make sense.”  
“Don’t have to. It’s white folks.” (Bennett 2020a: 38-39)

Witnessing this traumatic event is “a second birth for them, setting them on their different paths, because of how differently they each react to this experience” (Bennett 2020b). When their mother has them drop out of school and work for a wealthy white family, they finally decide to flee from Mallard and settle in New Orleans. There, Stella “[splits] in two” (Bennett 2020a: 205) and becomes Miss Vignes when she takes up a job reserved for white women: “in the morning, during her ride to Maison Blanche, she closed her

eyes and slowly became her” (Bennett 2020a: 209). While working as a secretary at Maison Blanche, she starts a relationship with her wealthy white boss, Blake Sanders, who soon asks her to move to Boston with him. Stella seizes the opportunity to cross the color line indefinitely and abandons her twin sister without explanations, only with a note that reads “*Sorry, honey, but I’ve got to go my own way*” (Bennett 2020a: 69).

Stella’s life as white Stella Sanders is explored in the third section on the novel, “Heartlines”, set in 1968. During a Homeowners Association meeting, Stella speaks up to prevent a black family from moving into the neighborhood she lives in for fear that they may uncover her racial identity. To protect what she has gained by passing – wealth, status, safety – Stella reinforces segregation in her suburb and “ends up embodying white supremacy in order to maintain her role as a white woman” (Bennett 2020b). Interestingly, she chooses to pass in a period of great, although gradual, social change: the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act have dismantled the legal grounds of segregation, and Black Power is redefining the value of blackness. Having experienced the overt hostility against blacks in the Jim Crow South and having lost a father to an unmotivated lynching, she “has not learned racial fluency in a way that she needs to succeed in this kind of world” (Bennett 2020b). Surrounded by moderate white people, her husband and her neighbors, who “maybe even agreed with some of [King’s] ideas ... but they still wouldn’t have allowed the man to move into their neighborhood” (Bennett 2020a: 179), Stella has to “learn how to be white in a way that is acceptable within this suburban, upper-class community [...] when the scripts for whiteness are being changed around her all the time” (Bennett 2020b). At first, she keeps her child away from the daughter of the Walkers, the black couple that moved across her street, and even calls her the N-word when she forbids Kennedy to play with her. Eventually, she bonds with Loretta Walker, as she feels it is the most meaningful connection she has ever had, besides her husband, since leaving Desiree. Stella and Loretta’s unlikely friendship, which sparks the curiosity of neighborhood, comes to an end when Kennedy calls Loretta’s daughter with the same racial slur she had heard from Stella. As the hostility against the black family escalates and culminates with bricks being thrown through their windows, the Walkers decide to move out of the neighborhood. In spite of her former friendship with Loretta, while gossiping with her white neighbors, Stella subscribes once again to white

supremacy and lies saying that Loretta's husband makes her uncomfortable for the way he looks at her.

Although her decision to pass is, in effect, a “psychic suicide that leaves her empty, lacking in empathy and bigoted” (Mathis 2020), Stella's fate significantly diverges from that of the tragic mulatta of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century passing narratives. By the end of the novel, she has obtained everything she has ever coveted by passing, she has fulfilled her aspiration of studying at university and becoming a professor, and her identity is never publicly revealed. She does not seem to regret passing, although the constant performance of whiteness and being estranged from her family, and from a community she can identify with, take a significant psychological toll on her. In a *New York Times* piece on Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Bennett has compared Stella's and Clare Kendry's attitudes towards their performance of whiteness: while Stella is “a sort of fugitive, always hunted, always hiding”, Clare is a “performance artist” (Bennett 2021) who finally finds an audience when she reconnects with Irene Redfield.

*The Vanishing Half* further explores the impact of Stella's choice to pass on her sister, Desiree, and on her daughter, Kennedy. After being abandoned by Stella, Desiree moves to Washington, D.C., where she marries Sam Winston, “the darkest man she could find” (Bennett 2020a: 5). In 1968, in the middle of the riots that follow Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, she runs away from her abusive husband after he asks her to have another child. Desiree returns to her hometown with her dark-skinned daughter, Jude, whom the people of Mallard describe as “blueblack, [...] like she flown direct from Africa” (Bennett 2020a: 4). Despite grieving the loss of her sister and living the life she had tried to escape, ultimately Desiree is “a woman with agency [...], a sense of belonging to a place and a people, and a fully developed identity” (Mathis 2020).

The character who undeniably struggles the most with constructing a stable sense of self is Kennedy Sanders. Since Stella's secrets have created “a void where the past ought to be” (Mathis 2020), Kennedy is unable to form a deep, trustful and genuine connection with her mother. Their strained relationship further deteriorates when, in a fit of rage, Jude reveals Stella's identity to Kennedy, who has always been haunted by the awareness that her mother has been lying to her. Despite Kennedy's efforts to get her mother to tell the truth about her past, Stella manages to find ways to parry her questions:

Later, Kennedy would realize how often her mother used money to avoid discussing her past, as if poverty were so unthinkable to Kennedy that it could explain everything: why her mother owned no family photographs, why no friends from high school ever called, why they'd never been invited to a single wedding or funeral or reunion. "We were poor," her mother would snap if she asked too many questions, that poverty spreading to every aspect of her life. (Bennett 2020a: 301)

When Jude reconnects again with Kennedy in New York, she offers Kennedy "a key to understanding her mother" (Bennett 2020a: 317) and hands her a picture of their mothers as little girls. As she gradually discovers Stella's past, Kennedy has to acknowledge what these revelations mean for herself:

"I'm not a Negro," [Kennedy] said.

Jude laughed again, this time uneasily.

"Well, your mother is," she said.

"So?"

"So that makes you one too."

"It doesn't make me anything," she said. "My father's white, you know. And you don't get to show up and tell me what I am."

It wasn't a race thing. She just hated the idea of anyone telling her who she has to be. She was like her mother in that way. If she'd been born black, she would have been perfectly happy about it. But she wasn't and who was Jude to tell her she was somebody she was not? Nothing had changed really. She's learned one thing about her mother, but what did that amount to when you looked at the totality of her life? A single detail had been moved and replaced. [...] She was still herself. Nothing had changed. Nothing had changed at all. (Bennett 2020a: 332-333)

Like her mother, Kennedy herself is a performer. After landing the lead role in a somewhat successful play, "the only thing that had given her a sense of purpose in months" (Bennett 2020a: 275), Kennedy drops out of college to pursue her acting career. Unable to build a strong sense of self, her identity gets entangled with that of the characters she portrays to the point that the crew she works with calls her by her character's name. Following a piece of advice she has received from a drama teacher, "true acting meant becoming invisible so that only the character shone through" (Bennett 2020a: 299), Kennedy makes effacement her "model of selfhood" (Resnick 2020). Although in her teenage years she had already started "[inventing] stories about her life, as if the reality were too dull to repeat" (Bennett 2020a: 263), Kennedy undergoes an identity crisis after learning about her mother's past:

[The picture of Desiree and Stella] was the only part of her life that was real. She didn't know what to do with the rest. All the stories she knew were fiction, so she began to create new ones. She was the daughter of a doctor, an actor, a baseball player. She was taking a break from medical school. She had a boyfriend back home named Reese. She was white, she was black, she became a new person as soon as she crossed a border. She was always inventing her life. (Bennett 2020a: 336)

After returning to Mallard to have Desiree ask Jude to stop contacting Kennedy, Stella can't "bring herself to lie to her daughter again" (Bennett 2020a: 368). When Kennedy moves back to Los Angeles, Stella unexpectedly decides to tell her daughter the truth about her past so that Kennedy can develop a steadier sense of identity:

She knew that her daughter had running in her blood too. She would always feel that urge to escape tugging at her and never understand why, not if Stella didn't explain it to her. (Bennett 2020a: 368)

The novel ends with Jude and her boyfriend, Reese Carter, floating undressed in a river the evening of her grandmother's funeral, sharing "this moment of bodily liberation, this baptismal moment of carefree joy together" (Bennett 2020c) after having "experienced so much trauma and so much shame and so much violence in their lives, particularly surrounding their bodies" (Bennett 2020c). Jude has endured the hardships of growing up without a father and being the only dark-skinned child in a color struck town, while Reese has faced the difficulties of being a transgender man in the 1980s and not having the means to gain access to proper medical care.

*The Vanishing Half*, with its diverse cast of characters who "wrestle with the roles they have been assigned" (Resnick 2020), explores the various ways in which people perform and shape their identities. As Sarah Resnick puts it in a *New Yorker* piece on Bennett's novel, "is identity something you take on, or something you take apart? Something you erect, or something you expose?" (Resnick 2020). Resnick points to effacement and exposure as different "models of selfhood" (Resnick 2020) within the novel. While characters like Kennedy conceal themselves in their performances, others, such as Reese, uncover their true selves: "on the road from El Dorado, Therese Anne Carter became Reese. [...] By Tucson, it was Therese who felt like a costume" (Bennett 2020a: 115). Reese is not performing, rather he is "aligning the way he self-identifies with the way he is perceived by the outside world" (Resnick 2020). On the other hand, when she crosses the color line to work at Maison Blanche, Stella puts up "a performance where there could be no audience" (Bennett 2020a: 209), although she soon starts to question whether she is really playing a role or not:

But what had changed about her? Nothing, really. She hadn't adopted a disguise or even a new name. She'd walked in a colored girl and left a white one. She had become white only because everyone thought she was.  
[...]

Sometimes she wondered if Miss Vignes was a separate person altogether. Maybe she wasn't a mask that Stella put on. Maybe Miss Vignes was already a part of her, as if she had been split in half. She could become whichever woman she decided, whichever side of her face she tilted to the light. (Bennett 2020a: 211)

### 3.3. A comparison between *Plum Bun* and *The Vanishing Half*

Published a century apart, *Plum Bun* and *The Vanishing Half* examine the ramifications of racial passing in a century of dramatic social advance: *Plum Bun*'s Angela Murray crosses the color line at the height of the New Negro movement, while *The Vanishing Half*'s Stella Vignes starts passing as white under Jim Crow laws and continues to do so after the Civil Rights movement, at a time when "conventions and rules about race are changing very dramatically" (Bennett 2020c). Nevertheless, both women are prompted to pass by the same rationale: being free.

Stella's decision to pass indefinitely is not the first time she has abandoned part of her family to seek a better life. She and her twin sister Desiree had run away from their hometown, Mallard, to New Orleans when their mother forced them to withdraw from school and start working for a wealthy white family as housemaids.

Each morning, the twins disappeared inside the Duponts' house and in the evening, they emerged exhausted, feet swollen, Desiree slumping against the bus window during the ride home. Summer was nearly over and she couldn't bring herself to imagine autumn, scrubbing bathroom floors while her friends gossiped in the lunchroom and planned homecoming dances. Would this be the rest of her life? Constricted to a house that swallowed her as soon as she stepped inside?

There was one way out. She knew it – she'd always known it – but by August, she was thinking about New Orleans relentlessly. The morning of Founder's Day, already dreading returning to the Duponts', she nudged Stella across the bed and said, "Let's go." Stella groaned, rolling over, the sheets knotted around her ankles. She'd always been a wild sleeper, prone to nightmares she never talked about.

"Where?" Stella said.

"You know where. I'm tired of talkin about it, let's just go."

She was beginning to feel as if an escape door had appeared before her, and if she waited any longer, it might disappear forever. But she couldn't go without Stella. She'd never been without her sister and part of her wondered if she could even survive the separation.

"Come on," she said. "Do you wanna be cleanin after the Duponts forever?"

She would never know for sure what did it. Maybe Stella was also bored. Maybe, practical as she was, Stella recognized that they could earn more money in New Orleans, send it home and help Mama better that way. Or maybe she'd seen that escape door vanishing too and realized that everything she wanted existed outside of Mallard. Who cared why she changed her mind? All that mattered was that Stella finally said, "Okay." (Bennett 2020a: 15-16)

Told by the point of view of Desiree, this passage highlights the dissatisfaction and frustration both twins feel when it comes to their limited opportunities as lower-class African American women living in a small town. While Stella's aspiration is to become

teacher at Mallard's public school, Desiree feels "trapped by [Mallard's] smallness" (Bennett 2020a: 9) and is distressed by the idea of living there forever. Having to abandon her studies is Stella's final straw, since it precludes her from going to college and it severely limits her employment possibilities. As months go by in New Orleans, the impulsive twin, Desiree, begins to falter, while Stella is more resolute in their project of making a living outside Mallard: "only later, Desiree realized that each time she'd wavered, Stella had known exactly what to say to dissuade her from returning" (Bennett 2020a: 65). Stella's sudden departure leaves Desiree to wonder if she ever was "the single dynamic force in Stella's life" (Bennett 2020a: 65), as she ingenuously believed.

As she begins passing for white to work at Maison Blanche, Stella starts to experience the privileges inherent in whiteness and, consequently, starts to further resent discriminatory practices that target black people: "one night, when they'd stood outside a restaurant waiting to be served at the colored window, she thought, Miss Vignes would not receive her food out an alley window like a street dog" (Bennett 2020a: 211). Moreover, she enjoys the sense of protection that comes with being by her boss's side:

When she was with Blake, no one bothered her. The leering white men who'd tried to flirt with her at her stop now fell suddenly; the colored men witting in the back didn't even look in her direction. (Bennett 2020a: 210)

The trauma that she has experienced in Mallard and that she relives in her nightmares, witnessing the lynching of her father and being assaulted by Mr. Dupont, the head of the family she used to work for, understandably leads her to seek the safety and protection that Blake can grant her. Indeed, when the twins meet in Mallard thirty-two years later, Stella tells Desiree that she ran off to Boston with Blake because she liked how she felt when she was in his company:

"Jesus," Desiree said. "I still can't believe you did it, Stella."  
"It isn't so hard. You could've done it."  
"You didn't want me to. You left me." God, Desiree hated how wounded she sounded. After all these years, whining like a child abandoned on the play yard.  
"It wasn't that," Stella said. "I met someone."  
"You did all this for a man?"  
"Not for him," she said. "I just like who I was with him."  
"White."  
"No," Stella said. "Free."  
Desiree laughed. "Same thing, baby." (Bennett 2020a: 360)

Contrarily to Stella, *Plum Bun's* Angela motives for passing are merely materialistic, since "it seemed to [her] that all the things she wanted most were wrapped

up with white people” (Fauset 1985: 73). Two events bring Angela to the decision to leave Philadelphia and cross the color line: first, her art teacher reproaches her for not having told him that she is black; on the same day, when she is about to enter the theatre with her dark-skinned friend Matthew Henson, the attendant denies access to Matthew but not to her. At this point, Angela reasons that whiteness is a badge of power: “she possessed the badge, and unless there was someone to tell she could possess the power for which it stood” (Fauset 1985: 73-74). Unlike Stella, Angela informs her sister Virginia of her plans of starting a new life:

Angela called in as soon as she heard her sister moving, “Jinny, listen. I’m going away.” Her sister, still half asleep, lay intensely quiet for another second, trying to pick up the continuity of this dream. Then her senses came to her.  
“What’d you say, Angela?”  
“I said I was going away. I’m going to leave Philadelphia, give up school teaching, break away from our loving friends and acquaintances, and bust up the whole shooting match.”  
“Haven’t gone crazy, have you?”  
“No, I think I’m just beginning to come to my senses. I’m sick, sick, sick of seeing what I want dangled right in front of my eyes and then having it snatched away from me and all of it through no fault of my own. (...) And these last two happenings with Matthew and Mr. Shields are just too much; besides, they’ve shown me the way.”  
“Shown you what way?” (Fauset 1985: 77-78)

Angela goes on and explains to her sister how people treat her when they assume she is white and how they react when they learn she is not:

“Well you see as long as the Shields thought I was white they were willing to help me to all the glories of the promised land. And the doorman last night – he couldn’t tell what I was, but he could tell about Matthew, so he put him out; just as the Shields are getting ready in another way to put me out. But as long as they didn’t know it didn’t matter. Which means it isn’t being coloured that makes the difference, it’s letting it be known. Do you see?”  
“So I’ve thought and thought. I guess really I’ve had it in my mind for a long time, but last night it seemed to stand right in front of my consciousness. Why should I shut myself off from all the things I want most, – clever people, people who do things, Art (...), travel and a lot of things which are in the world for everybody really but which only white people, as far as I can see, get their hands on. I mean scholarships, and special funds, patronage. Oh Jinny, you don’t know, I don’t think you can understand the things I want to see and know. You’re not like me—”  
“I don’t know why I’m not,” said Jinny (...). “After all, the same blood flows in my veins and in the same proportions.” (Fauset 1985: 78-79)

Virginia’s last sentence makes the reader wonder why the two sisters have such a different outlook on the same issues. How can Virginia tolerate the same things that Angela finds unbearable? Katherine Pfeiffer remarks that their “different skin colors [...] may have predisposed the sisters to their different characters, or they may have simply reinforced what already existed” (Pfeiffer 2001: 82). The difference in their skin tones does not

completely explain their contrasting perspectives, as their light-skinned mother, who would occasionally pass for white, “was perfectly satisfied, absolutely content whether she was part of that white world with Angela or up on Opal Street with her dark family and friends” (Fauset 1985: 73). Virginia and Angela’s stark differences in their characters entail a rejection of positivism, “suggesting that some generational upheaval has ruptured the flow of progress” (Pfeiffer 2001: 82). Indeed, Virginia, the younger sister, embraces her racial identity and her community’s old-fashioned values. It is Angela, the eldest sister, the individualist who is willing to sacrifice her bonds to her family and her community to obtain what she desires. Nevertheless, in more than one occasion, Virginia attributes Angela’s self-centeredness to a supposed “extra infusion of white blood in [Angela’s] veins which lets [her] see life at another angle” (Fauset 1985: 168).

Since “marriage and passing are the means by which [blacks and women] hope to gain access to power” (McDowell 1985: xi), both Stella and Angela eventually pursue a relationship with wealthy white men. Although at the beginning of *Plum Bun* Angela naïvely believed “that her racial affiliations rather than her gender profoundly impede her progress” (Rottenberg 2013: 271), soon after her arrival in New York she becomes determined to marry a rich white man: “if she were to do this, do it suitably, then all that richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved would be doubly hers” (Fauset 1985: 88). Her determination to “form desirable acquaintances” (Fauset 1985: 89) quickly develops into an obsession, to the point that she is willing to enter a loveless marriage for the sake of obtaining what she desires. On the other hand, it is Blake’s invite to move to Boston together that provides Stella with the irresistible opportunity to “become Miss Vignes for good” (Bennett 2020a: 221) and leave behind her old life of restraints. Although her marriage is based on a lie, Stella genuinely loves her husband, who grants her the security and comfort she lacked growing up poor in Mallard:

Now this was comfort – a languid morning spent floating across a swimming pool, a two-story house with cabinets always filled with food, a chestful of toys for her daughter, a bookshelf that held an entire encyclopedia set. This was comfort, no longer wanting anything. (Bennett 2020a: 175)

Nonetheless, her routine of floating by the backyard pool, which her husband has built to avoid the desegregated public ones, brings her to experience feelings of alienation, as “her days blended together, refracting each other, as if she were trapped in a hall of mirrors” (Bennett 2020a: 175). Her estrangement is further aggravated by the fact that

she does not frequently engage with her white neighbors since she feels that her performance of whiteness does not meet their standards. Even her moderate husband is mortified by the white supremacist behavior she displays from time to time:

In all the time he'd known her, she'd never spoken kindly of a Negro. It embarrassed him a little, to tell the truth. He respected the natural order of things but you didn't have to be cruel about it. [...] But Stella wouldn't even hire colored help for the house – she claimed Mexicans worked harder. He never understood why she averted her gaze when an old Negro woman shuffled past the sidewalk, why she was always so curt with the elevator operators. She was jumpy around Negroes, like a child who'd been bit by a dog. (Bennett 2020a: 165-166)

Like Stella, Angela shuns black people when she fears that they may expose her racial identity. One of the most climactic moments of *Plum Bun* is when Angela, who has just unexpectedly encountered Roger at the train station, ignores her sister Virginia and lets Roger disrespect her. Afterwards, Angela feels guilt and remorse for having abandoned her sister: “surely no ambition, no pinnacle of safety was supposed to call for the sacrifice of a sister” (Fauset 1985: 159). However, she soon begins rationalizing her behavior:

If I had spoken to Jinny, had acknowledged her, what good would it have done me or her either? After it was all over she would have been exactly where she was before and I would have lost everything. And I do so want to be happy, to have a good time. At this very hour to-morrow I'll probably be one of the most envied girls in New York. And afterwards I can atone for it all. I'll be good to all sort of people; I'll really help humanity, lots of coloured folks will be much better off on account of me. And if I had spoken to Jinny I could have never helped them at all. (Fauset 1985: 162)

Angela's desire to make amends for shunning her sister by helping humanity once she is married to Roger is an insincere attempt at justifying her selfish behavior. In fact, in the first half of the novel she has never expressed any interest in the struggle for racial uplift. Indeed, when Virginia encourages Angela to consider using her relatively privileged role of white-passing African American to do something for black people “who can't look like [Angela] but who really have the same combination of blood that [she has]” (Fauset 1985: 79), Angela scorns Virginia's “philosophy” and invites her to “be practical” (Fauset 1985: 79). Similarly, despite having lost her father to a lynching, Stella finds herself subscribing to white supremacy in order to protect her secret and takes a stance against a black family moving into her neighborhood.

*Plum Bun* and *The Vanishing Half* significantly differ when it comes to the outcomes of their protagonists' passing ventures. By the end of *The Vanishing Half*, it

has been made clear that Stella does not have the slightest intention to out herself as an African American woman, although she tells the truth to her daughter. Despite briefly returning to Mallard to confront Desiree, Stella has cut all ties with her old life to the point that Kennedy decides not to tell her of her mother Adele's death because she is sure that Stella would not want to know. Conversely, *Plum Bun* ends with Angela's racial homecoming. Significantly, Angela gives up her white persona to advocate for Miss Powell, a black student whose scholarship has been revoked because of her race. Her decision to publicly reveal her ethnicity is the final step of a long process of self-definition that allows her to break free from alienation and embrace her racial identity. Neither Angela nor Stella suffer the unfortunate fate of the tragic mulatta or get a punishment for their deception. Although Angela's scholarship is revoked, she is able to move to Paris thanks to the support of her friends. Moreover, Angela's reunion with Anthony Cross, a man who loves and respects her, compensates for the misery she has experienced throughout the novel (Condé 1994: 101). Stella, on the other hand, albeit having gained the safety and comfort she longed for, has sacrificed her whole family to build a new one with Blake. Although lies have secured the lifestyle she craved, they have also irreparably spoiled her relationship with her daughter. As a result, Kennedy is unable to establish a sense of identity and Stella "[continues] to burrow deeper and deeper into her own ambiguous feelings about herself" (Bennett 2020c). Ultimately, Stella and Kennedy are "shipwrecked, bobbing in open water, even if their life rafts are bejeweled" (Mathis 2020).

Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* are two brilliant novels that exploit the trope of passing to explore the issue of identity in the ever-evolving American society. As Bennett has framed it, "the tension within passing stories is between this idea of destabilizing race and then reaffirming it at the same time" (Bennett 2020b). This tension is embodied in Angela and Stella's characters, who have decided to give up their racial identity to escape discrimination, but who find themselves engaging in white supremacist behaviors in order to continue delivering their performances.

On the one hand, if you can perform whiteness, then what does it mean to be white? If you can move between these categories because you decide that you will, what does it actually mean that we have systems that are built on reinforcing those categories? (Bennett 2020b)



## Conclusion

The aim of my thesis was to compare two novels of passing written almost a century apart to explore the evolution of this trope and its employment throughout a period of dramatic social change. In fact, Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* was published at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, the first cultural and literary movement that celebrated African American identities, and is influenced by both the New Negro and the New Woman movements of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The Vanishing Half* appeared in 2020, in a radically different historical context. Bennett's novel is thus shaped by third-wave feminist theories developed in the latter half of the century and by the principles of self-definition brought about by the Black Power movement.

Despite being written at a time when feminism almost exclusively addressed white women's concerns, *Plum Bun* is an exceptional analysis of what will then be called double-discrimination, as its protagonist, Angela Murray, develops the awareness that she has limited access to power not only by reason of her racial identity but also by reason of her gender. Furthermore, Fauset offers an exploration of the power dynamics that regulate the relationships between men and women in 1920s urban societies, while recording women's access to the public spheres. As a result of her realization, Angela decides to try and become financially independent through her work as an artist rather than subjecting herself to a loveless marriage with a wealthy man for the sake of obtaining a deceiving sense of freedom. Finally, Fauset displays a progressive outlook on the topic of female sexuality. The 1920s were a period of seemingly incompatible agendas regarding female sexuality: on one hand, white women were challenging the notions of purity, chastity, domesticity and intimacy within marriage; on the other hand, black women were fighting to counter accusations of immorality and sexual misconduct. By portraying a cast of unconventional female characters, *Plum Bun* stages two projects that strived to the same end: women's right to define their sexuality on their own terms.

In *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett interrogates the issue of identity through a set of twins who grow up to be completely different adults, as one chooses to forsake her family and her identity to live a safer and more comfortable lifestyle, while the other returns to the town she had fled a decade before. The narrative suggests that witnessing the brutal lynching of their father has set Desiree and Stella Vignes on diverging

trajectories. Particularly, Stella reacts to this traumatic event by seeking in the arms of a wealthy white man the safety and security she lacks as a black woman. As a family saga, *The Vanishing Half* exposes how trauma is passed on to the younger generations through the characters of Jude Winston and Kennedy Sanders. Jude carries into adulthood the psychological burden of growing up within a town that values lightness and, therefore, leads her to detest her dark skin. Kennedy experiences severe feelings of alienation as she is unable to establish a stable and genuine relationship with her mother, who has been lying to her to conceal her origins.

By portraying two characters who have successfully crossed the color line and performed whiteness, both *Plum Bun* and *The Vanishing Half* question the validity of the racial binary that used to govern American society. Although great social progresses have been made since the publication of *Plum Bun* in 1929, it must not be ignored that countless aspects of American society are a direct consequence of the racial binary, based on the opposition of whiteness and blackness, that was established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to justify the institution of slavery. Published in the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first African slaves in Jamestown, the *New York Times*' 1619 Project records the repercussions of slavery in modern America: the mass incarceration of African Americans and the poverty and decay of American cities, opposed to flourishing suburbs, are just a few of these consequences. The knowledge of American history is thus paramount to comprehend the unequal treatment of minority people and the unequal access to resources and opportunities. On top of that, reading the works of minority authors who experience first-hand the discriminatory practices of institutional racism allows us to understand the extent to which these issues, far from being abstract theories, actually affect the lives of a large portion of the population.

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## Summary in Italian

Lo scopo principale di questa tesi è di analizzare e confrontare due romanzi della letteratura americana che trattano il tema del *passing*, fenomeno per il quale le persone di un dato gruppo *passano* per membri di un'altra categoria. In particolare, le protagoniste dei due romanzi presi in esame, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929) di Jessie Redmon Fauset e *The Vanishing Half* (2020) di Brit Bennett, sono donne afroamericane che decidono di passare per bianche. Per comprendere questa scelta di rinunciare ad una parte della propria identità è necessaria una conoscenza approfondita del contesto storico e culturale degli Stati Uniti d'America.

Il primo capitolo traccia una storia degli Stati Uniti dal 1619, l'anno in cui sono stati importati nella colonia inglese di Jamestown i primi schiavi di origine africana, fino agli anni '20 del ventesimo secolo, ripercorrendo le tappe che hanno portato all'abolizione della schiavitù e al riconoscimento di alcuni diritti alla popolazione afroamericana. È importante considerare che il concetto di razza e, di conseguenza, il razzismo sono stati elaborati nel contesto delle colonie britanniche del diciassettesimo secolo per giustificare l'istituzione della schiavitù e per proteggerne gli interessi economici. Infatti, a tale scopo, è stato definito un rigido sistema binario che oppone chi è bianco a chi non lo è, raggruppando insieme popolazioni dalle più disparate origini etniche e culturali. Questa classificazione è basata sulla *one-drop rule*, che stabilisce che le persone che hanno anche un solo antenato africano, una sola goccia di sangue "nero", sono nere. In questo modo, è stato creato un confine netto, chiamato *color line*, tra la razza bianca, considerata pura, e la razza nera. Il concetto di razza, dunque, non si fonda su basi scientifiche, ma è un prodotto culturale elaborato per legittimare la sottomissione degli schiavi africani e afrodiscendenti.

La schiavitù è stata abolita nell'intera nazione nel 1865, alla fine della Guerra Civile Americana, attraverso il XIII emendamento della Costituzione degli Stati Uniti. Negli anni successivi, il XIV e il XV emendamento hanno garantito, rispettivamente, la cittadinanza e il diritto di voto alla popolazione afroamericana. Queste tre misure a favore degli ex-schiavi hanno aperto l'era della Ricostruzione. Ciononostante, la popolazione nera ha continuato a subire violenze e pesanti forme di discriminazione. Ad esempio, agli elettori neri era negato l'accesso alle urne e, di conseguenza, il loro diritto di voto. In più,

nel 1896, con la decisione *Plessy v. Ferguson*, la Corte Suprema ha posto le basi per la segregazione razziale e per la dottrina “*separate but equal*”.

I primi decenni del ventesimo secolo hanno visto una migrazione di massa degli afroamericani dal Sud rurale alle metropoli del Nord, dove hanno riempito i posti di lavoro lasciati dai soldati che si sono diretti in Europa per partecipare alla Prima Guerra Mondiale. In particolare, il quartiere di Harlem, a Manhattan, si è popolato di intellettuali, artisti e professionisti afroamericani che sono diventati il modello del “New Negro”, il cittadino nero che si impegna per il miglioramento delle condizioni di vita degli afroamericani. Harlem è stata anche l’epicentro del primo movimento artistico nero, il Rinascimento di Harlem. L’obiettivo degli autori di questo movimento era celebrare la loro identità etnica e culturale e sovvertire gli stereotipi razzisti che dominavano la cultura americana. La scrittrice Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882-1961) è stata per sette anni editor letterario della rivista *The Crisis*. Da questa posizione, Fauset ha contribuito allo sviluppo del Rinascimento di Harlem, favorendo la pubblicazione all’interno della rivista di molti giovani talenti, come Langston Hughes, che si affermeranno poi come le principali voci della letteratura afroamericana.

Il topos del *racial passing* è stato utilizzato nell’opera di diversi romanzieri del Rinascimento di Harlem, tra i quali Fauset e Nella Larsen (1891-1960). I protagonisti di questi romanzi sono afroamericani dalla pelle abbastanza chiara per essere scambiati per bianchi e che, quindi, sfruttano il loro aspetto fisico per eludere la classificazione razziale e aggirare gli ostacoli della segregazione. I personaggi *mixed-race* hanno popolato le pagine della letteratura americana sotto forma dello stereotipo della *tragic mulatta*, condannata ad un destino drammatico a causa del suo “sangue misto”. La figura della *tragic mulatta* e il topos del *passing* sono stati utilizzati dagli scrittori afroamericani per smascherare l’assurdità della pretesa di classificare l’umanità in razze. Infatti, questi personaggi che con facilità attraversano la *color line* mettono in luce quanto questi confini tra le razze, ritenuti invalicabili, siano in realtà fluidi.

Sebbene Fauset sia stata etichettata come tradizionalista dai critici, nel suo romanzo *Plum Bun* esprime un punto di vista piuttosto progressivo per quanto riguarda la rappresentazione delle donne e della sessualità. Angela Murray, protagonista del romanzo, è una giovane donna afroamericana che decide di trasferirsi da Philadelphia alla New York degli anni ’20 dopo la morte dei suoi genitori. Per ottenere lo stile di vita agiato

che desidera, Angela passa per bianca e, in questo modo, evita le barriere poste dalla segregazione razziale. Quando capisce che non è solo la sua identità etnica, ma anche la sua identità di genere, a limitare le sue opportunità, Angela si pone come obiettivo un matrimonio con un uomo bianco e ricco. Tuttavia, rendendosi conto di aver perso sé stessa nella sua ricerca ossessiva di un partner abbiente, Angela decide di tornare a concentrarsi sulla sua passione, la pittura, e inizia a mantenersi grazie alla sua carriera artistica. *Plum Bun* racconta, dunque, l'uscita delle donne dalla sfera domestica e il loro ingresso in quella pubblica. Inoltre, attraverso la rappresentazione di molteplici figure femminili che vivono in modo diverso il loro rapporto con l'intimità, Fauset descrive anche la volontà delle donne degli anni '20 di riappropriarsi del loro corpo e di definire la loro sessualità al di fuori degli schemi rigidi della società americana.

*The Vanishing Half* è una saga familiare che segue le vite di una coppia di gemelle, Stella e Desiree Vignes, e delle loro figlie, Kennedy Sanders e Jude Winston. Scappate, negli anni '50, da una piccola comunità di afroamericani ossessionati dall'aver la pelle chiara, i destini delle gemelle si dividono quando Stella abbandona Desiree per sposare un uomo che la crede bianca. La decisione di Stella di passare per bianca è una risposta al trauma di aver assistito al linciaggio del padre, un atto di violenza inesplicabile che la porta a cercare quel senso di sicurezza e protezione intrinseco alla pelle bianca. È interessante notare che Stella sceglie di passare per bianca negli ultimi decenni del ventesimo secolo, periodo in cui la segregazione razziale è terminata e il movimento Black Power sta ridefinendo la coscienza afroamericana. In più, se Angela, la protagonista di *Plum Bun*, alla fine del romanzo rivela pubblicamente la sua vera identità etnica, Stella non mostra segni di pentimento e non sembra essere intenzionata a rinunciare a ciò che ha ottenuto passando per bianca.