BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES. RETHINKING "AMERICANNESS" IN BRIT BENNETT'S *THE VANISHING HALF*

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ABSTRACT

Arguably, canonical representations of US Americanness are built upon oppositions, which cannot but render anyone who does not fit the standard—White, male, heterosexual, and cis-gender—the "Other." If it is inherently evident how the overlapping between these features and Americanness is not only simplistic and stereotypical, but incredibly problematic as well, this is emphasized even more by literary representations that challenge such association. In fact, these implode from within, as they are parodied, and dismantled. Hence, new paradigms for Americanness are created. Such boundaries between the "canonical" American and "the Other" are constantly blurred, shifted, caricatured and, finally, demolished in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. In the novel many of the characters are portrayed challenging these boundaries—especially, that of race, and of gender—through the performance of a fluid identity which allows them to abolish the barriers between different categories, and to emphasize how such boundaries are nothing but arbitrary constructions. The aim of this paper, then, is to analyze how the characters who do not fit the traditional binary division between genders, and those who are able to shift between races—due to their physical appearance, and to their capability to introject and reproduce racial stereotypes—constantly blur canonical boundaries between the "stereotypical American" and "the Other". Hence, these are parodied and dismantled, while new paradigms for Americanness—that allow the characters to transcend such boundaries—are created. Moreover, the aim of this paper is to observe how the form of the novel mirrors the blurring, as various media—especially performative one, as photography, cinema, and theatre—intervene in the novel, hence signaling how the shift between boundaries is turned into a crucial thematic and formal element in *The Vanishing Half*.

Keywords: gender performance; African American women; White passing; US American identity.

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Arguably, canonical representations of "Americanness" are built upon oppositions, which cannot but render anyone who does not fit the standard—White, male, heterosexual, and cis-gender—the "Other."[1] If it is inherently evident how the overlapping between

[1] This paradigm is observable since the colonization of North America. The imposition of heteropatriarchal logics onto the Indigenous communities (whose social organization was based on a matriarchal structure) which inhabited the colonized lands served as a tool to strengthen the social hierarchy that would pose

these features and Americanness is not only stereotypical, but incredibly problematic as well, this is emphasized even more by literary representations that challenge and dismantle such association. This is the case in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2021), in which the traditional boundaries between "canonical Americanness" and "the Other" are constantly blurred, shifted, caricatured and, finally, demolished. The novel follows the story of the twins Stella and Desiree, born and raised in the fictional town of Mallard, inhabited by light-skinned Black people. After having endured the lynching of their father, and sexual abuse, the twins decide to flee the city: here, their pathways split. In fact, Stella decides to pass as a White person to get a job, falls in love with her White boss—with whom she shares a life, a marriage and a daughter, Kennedy—and disappears from her sister's life. On the other hand, Desiree gives birth to a dark-skinned daughter, Jude, and returns to Mallard to escape a violent husband. The twins embark in two diametrically opposite pathways into the performance of Blackness, to be eventually reunited by their daughters. In the novel many of the characters are portrayed challenging these boundaries—especially, that of race, and of gender—through the performance of a fluid identity which allows them to abolish the barriers between different categories, and to emphasize how such boundaries are nothing but arbitrary constructions.

The aim of this paper, then, is to analyze how the characters who do not fit the traditional binary division between genders, and those who are able to shift between races—due to their physical appearance, and to their capability to introject and reproduce racial stereotypes—constantly blur canonical boundaries between the "stereotypical American" and "the Other." These are parodied and dismantled, while new paradigms for Americanness—that allow the characters to transcend such boundaries—are created. As almost all of the characters are constantly seen performing—in performative acts, as theatrical performances, or in their daily lives—they incessantly shift their own identity, thus making it impossible for them to be enclosed in certain strict categories. In cases in which they seem to adhere to these categories, these are made implode from within, as these are performed by fluid, performative characters, that challenge the very strictness of the said categories. The construction of boundaries of the identity is made impossible, as the boundaries between White and Black, and between (performed) gender identities are constantly blurred. Finally, then, the aim of this paper is to observe how this blurring concurs to the deconstruction of the traditional binary us/Other—which lies at the foundation of the construction of "canonical" Americanness—and how this novel exemplifies the construction of a new, more functional and more inclusive idea of Americanness. The first paragraph of this paper offers a brief introduction on the concept of the Great

the Western (White) colonizers in a dominant position (Smith, 2010). The association of White (Western), cisgender males and the enforcement of such social structure onto racialized communities then constitutes the basis of the American social order, ever since the colonization of the continent.

American Novel, on the titles that have been appointed this label, and on the representant of "Americanness" in pieces of literature that are part of the American canon. The second paragraph expands on what is Americanness, using the *Vanishing Half* as an example. Through a close reading of the novel, the third paragraph discusses race and gender performativity in *The Vanishing Half*, and to envision if and how paradigms and archetypes that are proper of traditional "Great American Novels" have been deployed.

1. Defining Literary "Canonical" Americanness

In drafting his definition of the "Great American Novel" John William DeForest argued that it ought to be "the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence" (DeForest, 1868), and that its task should be that of "painting the American soul" (DeForest, 1868). Notwithstanding his claim that the perfect Great American Novel had not been written yet at that time, DeForest envisions Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) as the "nearest approach to the desired phenomenon" (DeForest, 1868). It is painfully ironic, then, that the first novel ever to be endowed with such title is not only written by a woman, but its main character is a Black slave, considering that almost all of the those to be later appointed with such label are written by White males, who focus their narratives on White males, who are thus made to be the (literary) ideal for "Americanness." In fact, the novels that have been crowned with the title of "Great American Novels"—although it is an arbitrary definition, as there are no specific requirements that a text has to fulfill in order to be defined as one—almost all of the results will prove to be by and on White males, with just a few (unavoidable) exceptions, as it is the case for Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). If the Great American Novel is to paint the "soul of the nation" and the "ordinary emotions and manners of the American existence" by endowing mainly literary works whose heroes are White males, these are made to be the representatives and models for what is American and for what everyone who inhabits the United States should strive to be. Such association between Whiteness, maleness and Americanness is inherently problematic. If in the Declaration of Independence—that, de facto, signals the birth of the United States and, consequently, of the notion of Americanness—it is claimed that among the unalienable rights of Americans there are "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," it is striking how contemporary American heroes seem to be unable to conquer any of it. In fact, as the main characters of the contemporary Great American Novels all appear to be doomed to failure out of their incapability of relating to the world they inhabit, their pursuit of happiness cannot but be unsuccessful[2]. Moreover, if liberty is one of the pillars for American identity, these characters often find themselves

[2] The most representative characters for this paradigm can be envisioned, for instance, in Jay Gatsby, the main character of F.S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Philip Roth's Seymour Levov, "The Swede", the hero of *American Pastoral* (1997).

trapped in a world whose values they cannot either fully comprehend or embody. Thus, they are either trapped in the past, in the desperate struggle to replay it, as its values are the sole ones they can be models for, or forced to comply with the chaos of contemporary America, in which they cannot seem to successfully perform their identities. Whatever they strive to do, such heroes do not seem to have freedom of any kind, but, rather, they appear to be trapped in a world they do not understand, in a world they are not willing to comply with, but from which they cannot flee, as they cannot escape the unsuccess that they are fated to. If such heroes are unable to either pursuit happiness, or to act as free subjects, they often appear to be not fit for life either. In fact, not only they are usually portrayed as uncapable or unwilling to live in the new chaotic America, but they appear as fated to such a failure that implies their deaths—which seems to emphasize their unfitness to such environment. If only the fittest survives, it rarely is the main character who perfectly embodies the Aristotelean paradigm for the tragic hero, so uncapable to inhabit his world that he cannot but succumb in it. It is evident then that if such new heroes—as Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, or Roth's Seymour Levov, the Swede—cannot embody the basic pillars of what an American is conceptualized to be in the Declaration of Independence, the whole notion of "canonical" Americanness is then significantly problematized. The traditional models for Americanness—those who are usually considered to be embodied in White male characters—are consistently posed into question in contemporary Great American Novels, that depict the failure of subjects who appear to perfectly fit such prototypes. In fact, if they are repository and representants of what is an American, does their fate signifies that Americans can only be doomed to failure? Or, rather, does it imply that, perhaps, it is necessary to broaden the sense of what an American is? Including other (non-White and non-male) notions and representatives for Americanness does not imply that these will necessarily be successful, but, if success does not appear as a possibility in contemporary America for White males (according to the models set forth in literature), perhaps others can illustrate novel ways to inhabit it.

While the aim of this paper is not to endow Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* with the title of "Great American Novel," this novel seems to feature some of the literary paradigms that are recurrent in novels canonically defined as GANs: the rags-to-riches archetype, the strive to achieve the American Dream (and the failure of this idea), the necessary *Bildung* of the main character(s), and the merging of the stories of the characters with that of the nation.

2. Questioning Americanness in *The Vanishing Half*

If the idea of "Americanness" appears to consistently be the core of those that have been classified as "Great American Novels"—as, for instance, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Roth's *American Pastoral*—their characters are supposed to represent the ideal American and to embody his experience, which is supposed to be common to all of those who

inhabit the United States. Hence, although such characters appear to be doomed to failure in contemporary Great American Novels, the critique seems to be upon the system, not the character himself who, on the other hand, usually appears as the bulwark of traditional, righteous American values. Thus, their Americanness is never questioned in such novels, which, then, perpetrate the idea of these characters being the perfect representants of what the core of Americanness is and of what a (real) American is supposed to be. However, the idea of Americanness is deeply problematized and questioned in literary works written by people of color, as these characters–and individuals–are constantly seen struggling to grasp and define what an American is, to define themselves in such way, as the oppressive, racist system of the United States usually treats them in manners that forbid them to being able to recognize themselves as real citizens—and, thus, as real Americans—as they are apparently not regarded as such by their own homeland and its institution.

The greater issues within the Black community for what regards the notion of Americanness cannot but be related to slavery and racism. As Ta-Nehisi Coates argues: "the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies" (Coates 2015, 11); moreover, he claims that: "The enslaved … were people turned to fuel for the American machine" (Coates 2015, 70). Then, questions regarding Americanness and the righteousness of a country and a system that Black people were forced to physically build are central in the literary output of the community. In fact, if Black people were never treated as citizens—or, as people, for that matter—within and by the country they were enslaved to maintain, questions on their belonging to such country come to be central in their narratives. Black people have constantly been dehumanized in the United States throughout the centuries—beginning with slavery and continuing with lynching and daily micro-aggressions. They have constantly been deprived of their basic rights as citizens and as Americans of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." On the other hand, an inherent struggle emerges from being cast out of and not being recognized by the country that your ancestors were forced to build and in which your people have lived for centuries and, thus, the impellent need of being treated as citizens of the United States—as the birth of movements as the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter proves. Then, questions surrounding Americanness cannot but be central in novels written by Black authors, as it also implies coming to terms with the racist past (and present) of the nation. Being an American, then, in Black literary outputs cannot but be inherently connected to the violence of America, to the traumatic past—and present—of racism that constantly comes back to haunt the characters.

Being a Black American is inherently connected to racial violence in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, which is set in Mallard, a fictional town whose light-skinned Black inhabitants seem to have introjected such ideologies that they project upon others who have a darker skin color than them. Particularly, the citizens of Mallard appear to be

obsessed with race and, especially, with "lightness," striving to marry the lightest person they can, to have even lighter children—a way in which they could respond to White beauty standards, and to be accepted by the dominant (White) culture:

> A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated as Negroes. … Lightness, like anything inherited at great cost, was a lonely gift. He'd married a mulatto even lighter than himself. She was pregnant then with their first child, and he imagined his children's children's children, lighter still, like a cup of coffee steadily diluted with cream. A more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before. ….Fair and blonde and redheaded, the darkest ones no swarthier than a Greek? Was this who counted for colored in America, who whites wanted to keep separate? Well, how could they ever tell the difference? (Bennett 2021, 6)

The question of race and Americanness is, then, made furthermore problematic. In fact, Black subjects who live in Mallard carefully choose the ones with whom they are to procreate in the attempt of adhering to the White, Euro-centric beauty standards, hence introjecting the rhetoric of their own oppressors—so much so that they are regarded as indistinguishable. However, if an outsider may regard them as being equals—and, consequently, Americans, in that sense—it is crucial to emphasize how White Americans would not perceive them this way, admitting that they would know they are Black people. This passage, then, seems to ironically portray the absurdity of race divides that are, nonetheless, so crucial in the United States that one's identity appears to be constantly subjected to this violence, that inevitably forbids people of color to be treated as Americans, to being granted all their rights. The senselessness of this system is, then, made explicit in the story of Leon Vignes[3], the father of the twins, whose death was caused by a double lynching: "Even here, where nobody married dark, you were still colored and that meant that white men could kill you for refusing to die" (Bennett 2021, 38). Such a claim, then, shows that violence towards Black people is all encompassing in America and inextricably embedded in White culture, that systemically deprives Black subjects of their rights to life, and liberty. The assertion that the only subjects who can experience freedom—and the use of the term "Free" is here crucial, as it cannot, once again, but remind of the Declaration of Independence, that established the existence of Americans, notions from which Black people are constantly excluded—are White people is furthermore carried on, as the twins Stella and Desiree speak:

> "I just liked who I was with him."
> "White."
> "No," Stella said. "Free."

[3] His story is retraced through the traumatic memories of the twins. It is recounted that Leon is lynched by a group of White men (despite his appearance, as he is very light-skinned); the twins witness this attack, whose traumatic aftermath is a recurrent theme in the novel. Leon survives the first lynching, but is eventually murdered in a second lynching, which takes place at the hospital during his recovery.

> Desiree laughed. "Same thing, baby." (Bennett 2021, 341)

The problematic character of the relationship between America (and, in a broader sense, Americanness) and Black people is made much more evident in the claim that: "Negroes always love our hometowns … Even though we're always from the worst places. Only white folks got the freedom to hate home" (Bennett 2021, 22). The association between Whiteness and freedom is made evident, as to continuously draw lines to assert the differences that forbid Blacks to experience freedom—and, thus, Americanness. In fact, if freedom is one of the constitutive characters of Americanness, and merely White people can experience it, a connection between Americanness and Whiteness is established. However, the claim that Black people cannot help to love their hometowns—and, in a broader sense, for the country they built—suggests a constant longing to be recognized as a part of it.

3. Performing Blurred Identities: Fluidity, and the Acting of New Models for Americanness

As previously argued, the contemporary heroes of those that are canonically envisioned as Great American Novels seem to be doomed to failure, and, sometimes, death. Such outcome to their endeavors seems to be, most of the times, caused by the fixity of their identity, by their incapability to change the way they perceive themselves, and relate to others. Lack of fluidity can, then, be seen as their fatal flaw. For instance, the cruciality of such feature is made evident if one considers past examples of the canonical Great American Novel, whose characters could still thrive precisely for their fluidity. A striking example can be envisioned in *Moby-Dick*, that Buell (2008) takes as a test-case, as the quintessential Great American Novel. Ishmael not only survives the shipwreck of the Pequod, but succeeds in accomplishing his mission, by recounting the happenings of the voyage. This acquires particular significance if one considers fluidity as the feature that characterizes him. For instance, not only he appears of fluid gender, as he describes himself with traditionally female gendered terms during his encounters with Queequeg: "I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife" (Melville 2018, 34). His fluidity is furthermore made evident by the very opening of the novel. In fact, as he invites his reader to "Call me Ishmael," he seems to imply that Ishmael is not his real name. Evidently, he is assuming a novel identity. Thus, it is evident how fluidity is crucial for survival—if not success. Fluidity is turned into a central element in *The Vanishing Half*, in which almost every character's identity is, somehow, fluid, and dependent on the choice of the character on how to perform their identity (Butler, 2002). Such fluidity and performativity of identity revolve around two key themes in the novel: race and gender. The majority of the characters in the novel constantly cross and shift between the boundaries of race and of

gender—imposed by a White, heteronormative society—thus performing blurred identities. The idea of gender performativity is drawn from Judith Butler (2002), who states that

> gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. … There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (33)

Although Butler's theorization of performativity mainly regards questions that concern the performance of gender identity, Butler herself emphasizes how such notion can (and is) inextricably connected to the performance of race, and of racial identity as well (Butler, 2002). Gender (and race) performances are to be envisioned as social performances, that is constantly constructed through repeated actions in the social world.

The fact that race is not a fixed concept, but, rather, a fluid and performative act (as gender) has been explored by Moriel:

> passing has been extrapolated into other areas of blending. Passing can be used to critique the binaries of gender and sexuality, pointing out not only that people can and sometimes do pass from male to female and from gay to straight, and vice versa, but that there is a fluidity, a continuum that over-rules the binary. By extrapolation, fluidity more truthfully describes the former binaries of race and even of class. (2005, 195)

In this sense, then, race, gender and sexuality are to be envisioned as mutually constitutive. In fact, on the one hand, the performance of this work through similar mechanisms. As Moriel explains, these categories are forced into binaries (White or Black, gay or straight, male or female). However, all of these are marked by an inherent fluid quality, as it is possible to shift from one to the other. In this sense, Bennett's novel perfectly shows how these categories (especially those of race and gender) are mutually constructive, how these intersect one with the other, and the mechanisms that underlie the performance of both. While most of the characters presented in *The Vanishing Half* could be deployed as examples for these mechanisms, the four main characters perfectly show how race and gender are mutually constructive. In fact, Desiree, Stella and their daughters Jude and Kennedy present represent different experiences of femaleness. In each of their experiences, race plays a fundamental role in the performance of femininity. Desiree and Stella are light-skinned Black women but, as Desiree embraces her racial identity, Stella chooses to pass as a White woman—thus, the twins embark on significantly different paths, as the relationships they have, and their social positions show. Their daughters represent the experiences of Black femininity (Jude), and of White femininity (Kennedy), and the social implications that race and gender have.

Moriel also expands on the performative nature of passing—and, subsequently, of race—by arguing that it is a choice of the individual. Thus, if passing has to do with agency, and if the subject decides to pass—actively choosing which acts are to be performed to incarnate a certain racial identity—the performative nature of race results

evident. While race is not constructed in the same way as gender is and, thus, should not be addressed in the same terms, the question of performance of racial identity is crucial in Bennett's novel. Many of the characters (*especially* those who pass, as Stella and Desiree) are presented as acting differently according to the racial identity they are to perform (White or Black). The performative aspect of race is furthermore explored when racialized characters are portrayed acting as non-racialized ones in theatrical performances.

As previously stated, after having left the town, Stella decides to pass as a White woman, and to live a "White life." On the other hand, Desiree fully embraces her identity as a Black woman, by marrying "the darkest man she could find." This element is crucial as it makes evident how identity is a performative act, so much that racial identity is portrayed as performative; on the other hand, this element emphasizes how racial divides are nothing but arbitrary definitions. The arbitrariness, and inherent senselessness, of racial categories, is made evident when Stella decides to pass, as Bennett states that: "An office like that would never hire a colored girl … It wasn't lying, she told Stella. How was it her fault if they thought she was white when they hired her?" (Bennett 2021, 65). The arbitrariness of race—and, thus, its inherent senselessness—is furthermore emphasized by the claim that: "white folks can't tell" (Bennett 2021, 74). Stella serves to emphasize how arbitrary the idea of "Americanness"[4] can be, as she is treated as any *White* American would be, as long as she does not reveal her true identity. On the other hand, she also embodies the violence intrinsic to this notion, as if one, after having become an American, could not help but project such ferocity upon others to maintain her own status. In fact, in order to conceal her Blackness while passing, and to make others perceive her as a White woman (a *true* American), all she does is redirect racial hate towards others that cannot cover their identity due to the color of their skin. In fact, it is recounted that: "she'd never spoken kindly of a Negro" (Bennett 2021, 153), that she contests a Black family moving into her rich, White neighborhood, and that she reproaches her own daughter for playing with the daughter of the said family: "Because we don't play with niggers" (Bennett 2021, 173). The issue is, thus, here problematized even more: it is possible to become an American (in the sense that Stella can benefit from the rights that are usually taken away from racialized subjects but that are recognized to other citizens), but at what cost? Moreover, the fact that Stella successfully performs her whole life as a White woman—so much so that she introjects and redirects racial violence—emphasizes (and parodies) how arbitrary the divides of race are, and how crucial performativity is for the expression of one's identity—at least in social contexts, as in this case.

[4] "Americanness" is here associated to the ideal previously explored, which is that of non-racialized, White subjects who can benefit of the rights of "life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness."

The idea of race as being fluid and performative is also incarnated by Jude, Desiree's dark-skinned daughter. If it is true that her skin color is so dark that it makes it impossible for her to pass as a White person, it is interesting to notice how—especially during her youth in Mallard—she still tries to be accepted among them, by introjecting and reproducing their beauty standards. In fact, at the beginning she seems to introject the racism (and colorism) of Mallard, embodied by her grandmother who "Gave her a big gardening hat, tied the straps tight around her chin even though it chocked her" (Bennett 2021, 88). Although her grandmother gives her the hat to cover her from the sun, her only aim in doing so was to avoid her to get tanned, even blacker; then, even if the hat is not mentioned as a means through which cover Jude's hair—traditionally a repository for identity among Black subjects—, it also serves such function, since hair cannot but show her Blackness. Moreover, the idea of a hat being used to conceal such expression of Jude's identity had already been conveyed earlier: "Each time that girl passed by, no hat or nothing, they were … galled … . If nothing could be done about ugliness, you ought to at least look like you were trying to hide it" (Bennett 2021, 69). The struggle to conceal or, at least, make Jude's kinky hair appear more fitting to the White-centric beauty standards of Mallard is furthermore depicted as Desiree dresses her daughter for her first day of school, hoping that other kids will be more prone to accepting her, if her hair are styled to fit their conceptions. Desiree, after having clothed her in a white dress, ties "pink ribbons around Jude's braids" (Bennett 2021, 43). Both the white dress and the pink ribbons symbolize purity and innocence, perhaps to make other children more welcoming towards Jude, or to serve as a metaphor for Jude's ignorance about racism, that she makes explicit in her wondering why everybody is staring at her. If, then, when she had arrived to Mallard she had no idea about racism, its methods are soon introjected and redirect against her own self soon:

> She'd tried to lighten her skin once, during her first summer in Mallard. She was still young enough then to believe that such a thing was possible … All week, her grandmother created potions. She poured baths with lemon and milk and instructed Jude to soak. … Nothing worked. She never lightened. (Bennett 2021, 110)

However, by growing older, and, especially, thanks to her encounter with Reece—whose pathway can be considered as mirroring Jude's, but with gender instead of race—Jude comes to accept her own skin color, and to proudly embrace her racial identity. The fluidity of Jude's perception of her own racial identity is made evident by claims such as: "She never felt darker than when she was running, and at the same time, she never felt less black, less anything" (Bennett 2021, 93), or: "In the dark, you could never be too black. In the dark, everyone was the same color" (Bennett 2021, 111). In fact, these statements emphasize how such notion, and how one perceives oneself in these terms, is deeply influenced by the surrounding environment, thus showing the inherent fluidity of this idea. On the other hand, these challenge conceptions of racial identity as fixed and

immutable. If race, then, is fluid, performativity of it becomes crucial, as the subjects choose how to pose and interpret themselves in these terms and act accordingly. Jude serves as a perfect example. In fact, as she arrives in Mallard she tries to perform a racial identity that is different from her own, as she strives to incarnate and to reproduce White beauty standards. The novel can then be read as a *Buildungsroman*. While in Mallard, Jude finds safe spaces in which she allows herself to feel her Blackness, her racial identity—as, for instance, when she runs. As the novel proceeds, not only she allows herself to feel her racial identity, but she also allows herself to perform it.

As certain sections of the novel can be read as an expression of Jude's *Bildung*, she also seems to incarnate the "rags to riches" paradigm. In fact, she enters medical school to help her boyfriend, Reece, to transition. In this sense, Jude incarnates the archetypes of the rags-to-riches paradigm and of the self-made woman, as she strives to better her position by working to enter medical school. While a similar path is followed by Stella (as they represent the same archetypes), Jude's story offers a novel meaning to this paradigm. The motives that lie behind Jude's decision to apply for a new job and for medical school is, then, crucial, as they give these myths a new significance. As a matter of fact, Jude's reason to attempt at applying is not mere gain, but, rather, love and selflessness, as she strives to better her position to help her boyfriend to transition:

> A job. She would find a new job. The answer seemed so simple once it arrived one night as she watched Reece climb out of bed in his sweaty T-shirt. He wanted a new chest … but the price was steep. … Still, she had done the math, unfurling the faded gray sock in his drawer and dumping the crumpled bills onto the bedspread. Two hundred dollars. He would never save enough by himself. (Bennett 2021, 133)

Thus, the novel foregrounds new ways of conceptualizing these crucial elements in the making of the American self. The "rags-to-riches" and "self-made woman" paradigms are here characterized by selflessness, rather than by individualism (which is a more traditional rendition of this paradigm, and it is embodied by Stella). In fact, Jude's actions are motivated by love and affection. They both, then, represent models for the rags to riches archetype, and two different versions of the "self-made woman." However, Jude embodies a novel, selfless, and loving one.

3.1. The Performance of Gender Identity

If characters as Stella and Desiree are constantly seen shifting their racial identity and performing different versions of it to better fit the situation, characters as Reece and Berry are crucial to emphasize how performativity is fundamental in the construction of a subject's identity, as the performance of their gender identities demonstrates. This can, perhaps, be better exemplified by Berry. In fact, Reece is a transgender character, whose performed gender identity perfectly overlaps with his gender identity. On the other hand, it is possible to state that Barry can be interpreted as the quintessential fluid character,

for not only does he shift his gender identity, but also his racial identity. In fact, Barry is a Black, cisgender man who doubles into a White, drag persona, named Bianca. This character takes fluidity and the performance—in every sense of the word, here—of identity to a deeper level, as not only he constantly shifts between his self (Barry) and his drag persona. Moreover, the latter is not a fixed one but, rather, an ever-changing character, signaling once more the flexibility inherent to identity and the cruciality of the subject's agency in choosing which part of it to perform. Such changeability of Barry's drag persona is exemplified by the numerous wigs he owns:

> Barry's apartment was lined with wig heads covered in hair of every color, realistic and garish: a brown bob, a black pageboy, a straight Cher cut dyed pink, the bangs slicing across the forehead. … During the week, he taught high school chemistry in Santa Monica; he only became Bianca two Saturdays a month in a tiny dark club off Sunset. (Bennett 2021, 115)

This point is particularly poignant, as hair hold a crucial relevance for Black subjects, as repositories and sites of identity: "Black hair is tied to a personal and collective identity; it tells stories and relays histories; it is a source of pride. Although there is no uniform texture, style or color, Black hair is representative of the strength and survival of African people." (DeLongoria 2018, 46).

The performativity of gender identity is furthermore explored through the media (as theatrical performance, photography, and drag shows) that intervene in the novel, and through the depiction of (performative) characters who are presented as familiar with these forms of art. In fact, those who are the most implicated with these media are Reece, a photographer (and, a transgender subject), and Barry, who doubles into his drag-persona, whose name is Bianca (ironically, this word's etymology comes from the German word *blank*[5], which means White). The name of Barry's drag-persona is particularly interesting, as it suggests the possibility of performing racial identity—along with gender identity. Shifting to Bianca, in fact, could also represent the shift from the performance of his racial identity (Black), to the performance of a different, White one (Bianca). Such incessant shift of his performed gender and racial identity makes it impossible for him to be enclosed in strict categories, and emphasizes their inherent arbitrariness. This is furthermore explored with characters who unconsciously perform a racial identity that is different from their own. This is perfectly exemplified by Stella's daughter, Kennedy, who is seen as performing two acts that intersect one in the other. On the one hand, she has the ambition of becoming an actress, and is seen on the scene playing different characters. On the other hand, she thinks that her mother is White and, consequently, she believes to be a White person. However, she unconsciously performs as a White person—as, since her mother, Stella, is a Black person, she is of African American descent.

[5] See: https://www.etimo.it/?term=bianco&find=Cerca

These characters, then, not only emphasize the cruciality of performance in the novel, but they also emphasize the similarities between racial performance and gender performance, how these categories intersect, and work through similar mechanisms.

4. Conclusions

As previously argued, the construction of boundaries of the identity is made impossible, as the boundary between White and Black, heteronormative and non-heteronormative are constantly blurred in the novel. This blurring, then, concurs to the deconstruction of the traditional binary us/Other, which lies at the foundation of the construction of "canonical" Americanness. It is evident, then, that this novel exemplifies how the construction of a new, more functional Americanness is to be found in blurred boundaries, in fluid identities and through performativity. Significantly, the final scene of the novel depicts Jude and Reese immersing in a river after the funeral of Jude's grandmother: "they waded into the cold water, squealing, water inching up their thighs. This river, like all rivers, remembered its course. They floated under the leafy canopy of trees, begging to forget" (Bennett 2021, 366). Not only water is traditionally associated to purity (and, it is a fluid element), but this feeling is augmented by the setting of the scene, that almost seems like a baptism. Then, such a quasi-religious turn offers the possibility for catharsis to characters who (figuratively and literally) immerse themselves in the fluidity of their identities, still traumatized by the bounds of a White, heteronormative society but, nonetheless, still floating.

Ultimately, Bennett's novel deploys some of the archetypes that are most recurrent in those that have been appointed as Great American Novels, and reshapes them, showing the cruciality of performativity and of fluidity. The novel can be read as *Buildungsroman*, as numerous characters are seen struggling to come to terms with their (racial) identity: this is the case for Jude. It features the self-made woman, and the rags-to-riches paradigms, incarnated by Jude and Stella. Finally, it interrogates the very notion of "the American." It questions "canonical" ideas concerning this notion, and emphasizes how fluid qualities are intertwined with the (apparently strict) categories - gender and race - that traditionally characterize it.

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