



IDENTITY, RACE, AND THE POLITICS OF PASSING: A CRITICAL RACE THEORY ANALYSIS OF BRIT BENNETT'S *THE VANISHING HALF*

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Abstract

This literary criticism analyzes Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* through the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory and postcolonial identity studies. The novel focuses on two identical black twin sisters whose paths diverge dramatically between light and dark in mid-twentieth-century America as a vehicle for interrogating how racial identity is created, performed, and challenged within American social constructs. This dissertation will expand the contemporary literary discourse by employing, critically analyzing, and relating the tenets of key scholars within the field, namely Critical Race Theorists such as Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, and those in postcolonial studies such as Stuart Hall and Frantz Fanon. We will begin by examining the fluidities of racial categories and then extend into the implications of “passing.” This work will explore the generational effects of racial trauma. This work will include extensive, intensive textual analysis of selected passages. It is here that we will analyze the manner in which Bennett utilizes: linear/non-linear chronology, alternating third-person dual point of view narration, and the dual representation of The American South as a place of symbolic landscape, in the construction of a narrative that both deconstructs the existing white supremacist structures and analyzes the concomitant psychosocial destruction those systems cause to black subjectivity. The result will provide evidence to support the theory that Bennett’s novel works as a societal comment on race relations in America, as well as an examination of psychic self-erasure, the notion of belonging and the futile attempts to elude one's racial inheritance, and as an intervention into and reconceptualization of the twenty-first-century racial passing narrative, within the contemporary African American literary canon.

Keywords: *African American Literature, Brit Bennett, Critical Race Theory, Identity, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Identity, Racial Passing, The Vanishing Half.*

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1. Introduction

Published in June 2020 in the midst of an American national confrontation with race, Brit Bennett's "The Vanishing Half" came out when Black Lives Matter gained new impetus in the wake of George Floyd's murder. It seemed, then, that the concerns central to Bennett's novel identity, systemic racism, Black lives and living could not be more relevant. Shortlisted for the Booker Prize and heralded as a 'landmark American novel of contemporary life' by the New York Times, it received considerable critical attention, although scholarly engagement with Critical Race Theory and with the text itself remains largely undeveloped.

The *Vanishing Half* begins in Mallard, Louisiana, an all-Black community dedicated to whiteness (and to the appearance of it) and the pursuit of a "light, light, light." When sixteen, the twin sisters Stella and Desiree fled. Desiree eventually settles in another Black town, alone with a daughter; Stella, however, vanishes and ends up a white wife to a white man. Not one to reveal her blackness, or any part of her racial past to anyone, including her daughter, she raises this child alone as a white woman. Bennett traces the double lives of the sisters through various decades and different generations in the two family lineages: the lives of both daughters of Stella and Desiree and their parents as well as their parents'.

This paper aims to address three specific issues within the framework of critical race theory as well as related approaches to post-colonial identity studies through in-depth readings of particular sections of the text in conjunction with critical theoretical discussions: (1) the constitution and articulation of racial identity as reflected in the phenomenon of racial passing; (2) the psychic harm and self-abnegation caused by internalized racism; (3) the transmission of racial trauma over time, and across generations. These discussions will argue that Bennett's novel represents a substantial contribution to existing discourse on race, identity and inclusion in the US. In the remaining sections, I first review prior scholarly research on the text as part of broader work in African American literature and texts featuring racial passing. Then, I provide the critical theoretical grounding of my work with references to CRT, post-colonialism, and intersectionality, and my research method before applying it to text and

engaging with findings. The paper concludes with some final remarks and suggestions for subsequent studies.

2. Literature Review

Racial passing, one of the central narrative tropes of African American literary tradition, spans from Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) to Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). In these early narratives, passing often serves as a mechanism through which authors destabilize and reveal the social contingency of racial categorization. Passing works as both an act of survival and an act that produces an incalculable amount of individual psychic pain due to the loss of history, community, and family for the person who passes. Recently, the theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory has been utilized to explore the passing narrative. For example, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of America* argues that passing discredits any form of racist coherence. He reads racial passing narratives as sites that undermine essentialist notions of race (2001, p. 159-161). Gayle Wald (2000) views passing narratives as places in which writers negotiate the borders of the racial community and emphasizes the performativity of race (p.116).

Contemporary authors have drawn on these insights to investigate passing narratives that address racial passing in response to post-racial ideology, which erroneously claims that race is a marginalized force in contemporary society.

For example, Emily Orlando (2016) reads the return of racial passing narratives in contemporary fiction as part of an engagement with and a rebuttal of post-racial ideology. This research paper continues this trajectory by utilizing the lens of CRT to examine how *The Vanishing Half* participates in the passing tradition, but also challenges and revises the tradition by engaging with new critical, social, and political frameworks. By focusing on two sisters in *The Vanishing Half*, the novel revises and interrogates earlier passing narratives in several important ways. Rather than centering on one passer's individual choice, Bennett's novel focuses on two sisters in order to situate racial passing not simply as individual agency, but as a structural phenomenon and as deeply socially and familiarly consequential. In *The Vanishing Half*, the narrative spans a range of decades, including the Civil Rights Movement, post-Civil Rights, and the early stages of multicultural American society. Bennett employs the historical setting to investigate how these socio-historical shifts influence the trajectory and consequences of racial passing. Critical race theory emerged in the US legal academy in the 1980s and early 1990s. Critical Race theorists such as Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, Richard Delgado, and other scholars maintain that racial identity has been constructed by law to maintain the unequal distribution of power between whites and other non-white groups, that racism should be viewed as systematic and endemic to US legal and social structures, and that the

lived experiences and epistemologies of people of color are central to the critique of law and society. CRT has significantly contributed to a variety of literary studies disciplines. Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), bell hooks (1992), and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) applied CRT to study African American literature as well as other literary texts written by authors from marginalized groups, examining the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, and the critique of white power structures. Scholars such as Saidiya Hartman (1997) and Christina Sharpe (2016) engaged in more recent work, including the concept of the “afterlife of slavery,” that demonstrates the continuity and repetition of slavery’s traumatic impacts through contemporary Black literary production. While the literature produced on Bennett’s novel after its release mostly concentrated on how *The Vanishing Half* addressed colorism, privileging of light skinned women in Black communities, and how its fictional town of Mallard served as critique of internalized racism in Black people, there is little scholarly work to critically explore Bennett’s text using a lens that takes race and its socio-historical impact into account and the following article hopes to fill this gap. Postcolonial theory and CRT both also provide fertile ground for reading *The Vanishing Half*. Frantz Fanon’s focus on the psyche and trauma of colonialism and his conceptualization of the internalizing of the values of white supremacy by the colonized in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) would offer tools for understanding Stella’s erasure of herself from her own body and her daughter Kennedy’s erasure of her Blackness and her rejection of her maternal lineage. Hall’s concept of cultural identity as becoming, as fluid and always on the line in ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ (1990), would frame identity within Bennett’s novel not as fixed but rather as always in the process of becoming and of being constituted. Hall’s conception of the marginalized other’s imitation of the dominant-mimicry-is also helpful in reading Bennett’s work: “For the colonized who mimicked whiteness, whiteness cannot fully or totally consume, and in this it is possible to see it as both itself “seductive,” alluring even to those outside of it, and also something that ultimately only goes skin deep-white-and cannot penetrate fully into the psyche”. Bennett’s depiction of Stella as almost a perfect embodiment of white femininity ultimately collapses as, at the novel’s conclusion, the hidden history of her Black racial identity is revealed as the return of the repressed in the language of Bhabha.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Critical Race Theory

In *The Vanishing Half*, three foundational principles of Critical Race Theory ground the following analysis: Social Construction. This first principle “maintains that race is not a biological fact, but a social and legal construction used to justify and maintain social hierarchies of power” The racial categories which we utilize and take for granted, Crenshaw and her colleagues (1995) note, are malleable, their meanings continuously

created and re-made throughout social struggles: “The history of ‘race’ is a complex, multifaceted process which is continually constructed, contested and negotiated” (p. 430).

In the novel *The Vanishing Half*, this notion is perhaps taken to the extreme as Stella’s actual biological essence does not change as she “transforms” into whiteness; the transformation is accomplished purely through social presentation, legal documents and cultural performance. (2) Intersectionality. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), “is a concept that racial and gender-related discrimination can overlap in the lives of minority women.” It suggests that one cannot analyze race separately from gender, class, geography, sexuality, etc., since multiple identity categories influence an individual’s experiences. This novel is intersectional in scope, as the stories of both sisters are inextricably linked and their disparate fates can only be understood in relation to one another’s experiences of gender, race and class.

Desiree’s path, for instance, leads her from white-working-class circumstances in the rural South to deeper poverty and the social isolation of black, working-class life. Stella’s journey is one of ascension to comfort, facilitated by her racial mobility into the comfort of middle-class, white, northern life. (3) Racial Formation. Omi and Winant (1994) theorize that “racial formation refers to the process by which racial categories are created, mobilized and transformed over time in society.” Bennett’s novel offers an illustration of racial formation through time, demonstrating how the meanings associated with race evolve and are constantly reshaped over the decades while the overall structure of social hierarchy-and specifically race hierarchy-endures.

3.2. Postcolonial Identity Theory

Also important to this work is postcolonial identity theory, specifically the writings of Fanon, Hall, and Bhabha. The colonized subject’s internalization of the colonizer’s gaze, a key concept of Fanon’s theory, provides the necessary framework to discuss the psychic violence that has been carried out through race politics. As he outlines in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon theorizes the colonized subject’s viewing of himself through the lens of the colonized (white) gaze, resulting in a state of double consciousness-originally coined by W.E.B.

Du Bois (1903), wherein the Black subject simultaneously occupied two opposing loci: her own subjectivity and the fetishized object of the gaze of white subjectivity.

The theoretical concept of cultural identity as a kind of positioning within narrative, in Stuart Hall’s articulation (the stories we tell of ourselves), also seems integral to Bennett’s narrative tactic. Hall contends that identity cannot be thought of as a stable, intrinsic quality, but that instead it is continuously produced through representation; identity is a product of discourse, and it’s through language, representation and narrative that we construct ourselves in and with others’ eyes. Indeed, it is possible to consider *The Vanishing Half* as an elaboration on this fundamental concept. Bennett’s characters are

perpetually constructing themselves through their various stories and personal narratives; the formal conventions of the novel, with its multitudinous perspectives and non-linear structure, often seem to trace its protagonists into moments of intimate self-creation in support of Hall's insistence on identity as a performative process.

3.3. Colorism as Structural Violence

The third approach to colorism explored in this project is a framework of colorism as structural violence. Scholars such as Margaret Hunter (2005) and Verna Keith (1991) have conceptualized colorism-discrimination based on skin tone within racial groups-as a practice through which existing white supremacist power structures are reproduced within communities of color. Bennett's creation of the fictional town of Mallard--established by a former slave and his declaration that his descendants lighten their skin each generation until they had become white--is a lengthy interrogation of colorism as internalized white supremacy. In essence, its founding premise articulates what colorism in other places obscures-the fact that the drive for lightness is actually a drive for whiteness, and that the drive for whiteness is racial self-hatred-a product of the psychic violence of white supremacy.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The study is a qualitative interpretive research method that relies on close readings and textual analysis. It is centered on Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (Riverhead Books, 2020) and uses CRT, postcolonial identity theory, and narratology to create a complex reading of how Bennett writes about race and identity. Close reading pays careful attention to the form of texts as well as their thematic concerns and ideological underpinnings. Close readings are thus form-and-content-based readings: the formal concerns are inherently tied to ideology; the novel's form is part of the ideological work.

The major data used in this study are chosen passages from *The Vanishing Half* and were selected for their theoretical import. Passages are identified to represent the novel's treatment of three core theoretical themes: the performance of racial passing and the construction of identity; the psychosocial cost of self-effacement; and racial intergenerational trauma. Further, secondary sources such as theory texts, peer-reviewed articles, and critical commentary were incorporated in the reading. In selecting textual data, a sampling rationale is utilized by employing a sampling technique that targets specific passages: 'Rather than striving for a full coverage of a text, a sampling rationale is employed that involves identifying specific parts of a text that hold the most dense concentration of a work's theoretical concepts for an in-depth, sustained, Close Reading of them' (Smith as quoted in Super 13). This is not unusual in literary scholarship.

The process of the analysis is performed in three steps. First, each selected passage is read for its immediate narrative and ideological meanings. Second, the selected passage

is reread with respect to theoretical considerations and to how it embodies, problematizes, or challenges the particular theoretical framework. Third, the selected passage is reread in the light of the entire narrative of the novel and its argument. The movement is both horizontal between specific moments in the textual fabric and vertical from details to the overall argument of the novel.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

The novel's striking depiction of the fictional town of Mallard at the outset signals the story's theoretical preoccupations: 'Like all colored people who'd made it out of the South, the Vignes family had learned to leave the past behind. In Mallard, there was no past, only the daily fact of lightness, its aspiration, and its shame. The town was founded by a man who'd promised himself that each generation of his family would be lighter than the last, until they'd bred whiteness into themselves.' (Bennett, 2020, p. 4). The passage is exceptional in its ability to contain CRT's fundamental premise of the social construction of race. Mallard's foundational ideology clearly exposes the underlying operation that colorism obscures: the aspiration to lightness is an aspiration to whiteness, and this aspiration is no mere personal inclination but an imposed, structural one, built into the town's very origins. Mallard's foundation makes Omi and Winant's (1994) theory of racial formation tangibly manifest by depicting the production and reproduction of racial meaning through social institutions and everyday practices.

The phrase 'bred whiteness into themselves' is significant as it places colorism's aspirational ideology within the context of animal husbandry and eugenics, revealing its insidious violence and inherent collaboration with the discourse of white supremacist science.

Aspiring to whiteness through the deliberate management of procreation presupposes the white supremacist valuation of whiteness as ideal and Blackness as flawed. Fanon's analysis of internalized racism is readily available in Mallard's foundational ideology: the town is not just compliant with white supremacy but an instigator. At the same time, Bennett's use of the cool, ethnographic, detached frame of the opening narrative also works to maintain ironic distance from this ideology of Mallard.

'It's aspiration and its shame' indicates the novel's critical vantage point on Mallard's founder: its aspiration toward whiteness, as an aspiration toward freedom, and capitulation to racial domination, respectively. The novel's double perspective is also key to the work of CRT.

The novel's most lengthy and theoretical excursion into the dynamics of passing is the description of Stella Vignes's identification as white. In one of the book's more definitive passages about racial identity as performance, Stella recollects first successfully passing in her department-store job: 'She had slid into whiteness like a pair of shoes that

didn't quite fit, a little tight across the toe, a little loose at the heel. But after a while, you stopped noticing. The shoes became your shoes.

The life became your life.' (Bennett, 2020, p. 112) The analogy is, of course, domestic and a rather disquieting comparison that highlights both the uncanny experience of entering a racial identity that is not your own and, subsequently, the way such identity can become normalized through repeated engagement with a role or a script of being something or someone one is not. It's a formulation reminiscent of Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. Identity is never simply a pre-existent truth that can be revealed through performance but is actively constituted through such performances: identity is constructed by performative and repetitive acts of performance of social scripts and conventions. Stella's identity as white isn't a realization of her inherent true self; it is a production, generated by the day-to-day repetition of the visual, aural, and social performative cues of being white-through dress, speech patterns, association, gesture. The statement reflects Stuart Hall's (1990) claim about the production and dynamism of cultural identity, but in Stella's case, her performed identity as white is increasingly and insidiously 'realized'. But it is a realization fraught with tension, since those 'shoes that don't quite fit' and cause discomfort 'a little tight across the toe, a little loose at the heel' also hint at the psychic trauma of the experience. If the tight shoes distort physical movement and the loose ones are unstable, then Stella's embrace of whiteness, even if it becomes familiar, also requires her to continuously displace and distend her sense of self, even to force a painful new shape. 'this is closely aligned with the theoretical formulation of du bois's (1903) concept of the double consciousness - the condition of 'always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.' in a reversed twist on this dynamic, Stella must look at herself through the lens of whiteness as performance, forever measuring her performed self against the suppressed truth of who she was.

It is through the story of her daughter Kennedy-a daughter who is raised entirely in the white orbit and has no awareness of her mother's racial background-that the psychic toll of Stella's racial passing is most vividly illuminated. At the climax of the novel, Kennedy, now grown, finally meets her mother's sister Desiree, a moment at which she begins to unravel the truth about her own genesis: "She had always known, she told herself, not that she was Black-she had never thought of herself as Black-but that something had been kept from her, that there was a door in her mother that was always locked, a room she was never allowed to enter." (Bennett, 2020, p. 267) It is impossible to read this passage without thinking about it as the ultimate in literary psychological realism, a precise literary expression of Fanon's (1952) description of the internal psychic structures of racial oppression.

Kennedy's understanding of her mother as having a "room she was never allowed to enter" gestures to the repressed raciality as a structural deficit in the maternal-as an absence that creates an immeasurable void at the core of the family's love and knowledge. The image of the "locked door" implies both secrecy and denial, both the denial and active exclusion of her racial otherness, a denial that must entail ongoing and profound psychic labor on Stella's part. The claim "she had never thought of herself as Black" is of course deeply significant from a critical race theory perspective, for it signals that her lack of identification as Black is not an accidental occurrence but a product of ongoing processes of racial formation; her subjective sense of herself as white is a consequence of the combined workings of her mother's passing, her father's whiteness, and the predominantly white, middle-class social environments she inhabited. Her belief in herself as white is a consequence of what Crenshaw (1989) has termed the normalization of whiteness, whereby the default racial identity goes largely unrecognized and becomes the unmarked term in the relational logic of race, by which all other races are constructed.

Furthermore, Kennedy's experience of her mother as a woman with a locked room is a potent symbol for intergenerational transmission of racial trauma.

Stella's concealment of her race not only shapes her own psyche but also the very mental universe in which her daughter grows, introducing a void at the core of Kennedy's subjectivity that she cannot explain or understand. This speaks to Christina Sharpe's (2016) formulation of the wake, whereby the passing of racial violence through time generates a wake, or disturbance, that continues to impact those who come after in ways not always readily legible as racial trauma.

The most potent investigation of intergenerational racial trauma comes in the interaction between Desiree's daughter Jude and Stella's daughter Kennedy. Jude is described as so black "she was the color of a midnight sky"; she therefore represents an uncompromised blackness, while Kennedy represents a racial passing and the removal of Blackness. When the cousins meet as young adults, Kennedy, now aware of her mother's secret, and Jude, of her aunt's disappearance, their connection explores the crossing between the concealed and visible racial identities.

"Jude saw in Kennedy's face everything that had been taken from her mother and grandmother, and she hated her for it, and then hated herself for hating her, because Kennedy had not chosen any of this, any more than Jude had chosen to be born into the wreckage of her family's abandonment." (Bennett, 2020, p. 298)

This moment encapsulates the moral ambiguity of the novel: Jude's hatred of Kennedy is met with self-hatred due to her inability to confront the unfairness of her mother's and grandmother's loss, whilst acknowledging that Kennedy, too, is a victim rather than an enforcer of the racial inequality which has defined her fate. In CRT terms, this passage highlights Bell's (1980) interest convergence, where the best interests of black

people in attaining equal rights are continually subservient to those of white people, whose best interests in their racial superiority are themselves formed by the systems that are eventually to their own detriment. Kennedy and Jude's caught in this racial order created neither by them nor desired by them; the novel makes no judgement of either the position as victim or perpetrator.

The notion that the racial passing of Stella has left a 'wreckage of her family's abandonment' illustrates the violence inherent in such an action. Stella's passing, in effect, has an impact not just on Stella but on all around her, an effect that echoes through the lives of the family, in line with the CRT framework of racism, which conceptualizes racial inequality not simply in terms of individual acts but as a social construct that creates lasting consequences.

It is clear from the above that *The Vanishing Half* is an elaborate engagement with the primary concerns of Critical Race Theory and postcolonial identity theory. Bennett's novel makes three key theoretical interventions in contemporary African American fiction. First, the novel engages in a protracted critique of the social construction of race by positing racial identity as a performable, even if limited, set of identifications.

Stella's passing confirms the fact that racial categories are merely socially contingent and thus arbitrary; a white identity is a result not of biology but of a complex web of social actions, associations and silence. At the same time, however, Bennett insists on the real social, legal, and economic implications of the race-based hierarchy: regardless of its arbitrary social nature, racism is very real. This act of double critique-of deconstructing race and reaffirming racism-is precisely what Critical Race Theory does. Second, the novel offers a vivid portrayal of the psychic dimensions of racism that is faithful to Fanon's theorizations of this issue. Bennett presents, through Stella, Kennedy, Desiree, and Jude, a composite of the psychic traumas of race-of the passer who attempts self-erasure; of the child of the passer, alienated from an inherited consciousness; of the sister left behind, burning with rage and sorrow; and of the daughter, carrying the racial burden of whiteness from which the passer fled.

The novel thereby creates an exceptional panorama of the racial psychic life of racism for its participants. Third, the novel form enacts the theoretical points that Bennett wants to make. The novel's nonlinear chronology, moving backwards and forwards in time, gives form to the idea that intergenerational trauma is a temporal phenomenon: the past lives on in the present consequences. The non-linear nature of the novel's focus also enacts Hall's (1990) claim that subjectivity always involves its relation to an "other."

It simultaneously focuses on both the mother-and-daughter pairings, breaking the conventional passing narrative's focus on the passer and thereby forcing us into several conflicting subjectivities. In *Mallard*, Bennett locates the source of the novel's obsession with passing and self-erasure in a community that aspires to whiteness, and the novel thus

shows that passing and self-erasure are symptoms not of individual psychology but of an entire social and political order: in essence, the structural functioning of white supremacy, internalizing and reproducing itself from within its marginalized communities. This is the most important argument of Critical Race Theory, and it is to this insight that Bennett gives literary form with unmatched insight.

6. Conclusion

The novel, read in terms of critical race theory and postcolonial identity studies, is a critical intervention into contemporary scholarly and popular debate about race, identity, and racism in America. Using textual close-readings, I show how the narrative explores how racial identity is socially constructed, illustrates the psychic damage that passing and self-erasure exact, and examines with psychological insight and stylistic sophistication the transmission of racial trauma across generations. My reading, in terms of CRT frameworks such as social construction, intersectionality, and racial formation, suggests that the novel is deeply engaged with the structural realities of racism, portraying not only individual choices made in isolation but also the structural context that frames those choices and the insistence on the damage of the racial hierarchy.

The novel, therefore, represents an extension and transformation of the tradition of the racial passing story for the 21st century in a post-Civil Rights, post-multicultural, and post-Obama context. In addition to providing an important extension and revision of a literary genre that interrogates the contours of race and identity, Bennett's novel transcends the interpretive frameworks it employs, generating a reading experience so rich and profound in emotionality, formal beauty, and nuanced character development that it cannot be reduced to abstract principles. In this way, literature can illuminate understandings of race that social sciences can only address theoretically and can help us to inhabit the reality of lived experience more deeply, and it may even push beyond our current understanding. Research would therefore extend this research further; I suggest it in the next section. Some of this research would include writing this reading in comparison to other racial passing literature, such as Nella Larsen's "Passing" and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in order to examine genre in the 21st Century. Further research might also include using intersectionality to include a more in-depth analysis of gender within my reading in order to expand the interpretation to reflect issues relating to female identity within racial and sexual oppression.

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