

Colorism, Passing for White, and Intertextuality in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*: Rewriting African American Women's Literary Tradition

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**Abstract**

This article draws on various theories and studies about the color line, colorism, and racial passing in African American culture, history, and literature to examine the themes of colorism and passing for white in Brit Bennett's 2020 novel *The Vanishing Half*. This article juxtaposes Bennett's novel alongside earlier works written by twentieth-century African American women writers, underscoring Bennett's intertextual influences, which include Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *God Help the Child* (2015). As Bennett revises and incorporates earlier novels into her own, she redeems tragic female characters such as Pecola Breedlove and Clare Kendry, highlights the persistence and damage of colorism, updates the passing narrative, and defies stereotypes about Black women. It concludes that in *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett proposes a fresh path for twenty-first-century African American fiction through the themes of colorism and passing for white in her rewriting of African American women's literary tradition.

**Keywords:** *The Vanishing Half*, African American literature, colorism, passing, intertextuality.

Colorismo, *passing* e intertextualidad en *The Vanishing Half* de Brit Bennett: Una reescritura de la tradición literaria afroamericana femenina

### Resumen

Este artículo aplica varias teorías y estudios sobre la línea de color, el colorismo y el fenómeno de *passing* en la cultura, la historia y la literatura afroamericana para examinar los temas del colorismo y *passing* en la novela de *The Vanishing Half* (2020) de Brit Bennett. Lleva a cabo un estudio comparativo de *The Vanishing Half*, subrayando la presencia de intertextualidad, con otras novelas escritas por mujeres afroamericanas del siglo XX: *Passing* (1929) de Nella Larsen, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) de Zora Neale Hurston, así como *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) y *God Help the Child* (2015) de Toni Morrison. Bennett, además de revisar e incorporar estas novelas en la suya, redime a personajes femeninos trágicos como Pecola Breedlove y Clare Kendry, destaca la persistencia y el daño del colorismo, actualiza la narrativa de *passing* y desafía los estereotipos sobre las mujeres negras. Concluye que, en *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett propone un nuevo camino para la ficción afroamericana del siglo XXI a través de los temas del colorismo y el *passing* en su reescritura de la tradición literaria de las mujeres afroamericanas.

**Palabras clave:** *The Vanishing Half*, literatura afroamericana, colorismo, *passing*, intertextualidad.

### 1. Introduction

The richness of the variety of skin colors and shades, Fritz Gysin notes, is what causes skin to function as a “boundary” in human relations and interactions (287), which explains why in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) W. E. B. Du Bois affirmed that the color-line would be the problem of the twentieth century (11). Decades later, in the essay “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look like?” (1982),

Alice Walker extended Du Bois's prophecy and proposed that the color line would also be the problem of the twenty-first century, influencing not only the relation between races, "but [also] the relations between the darker and the lighter people of the same races, and of the women who represent both dark and light within each race" (311). In this context, the color line functions at two distinct levels: at the interracial level, which expresses "institutionalized racism," and at the intraracial level (Peters 163), which, in the case of the Black community, is "the expression of dominant race ideals" (Hall 102). When skin discrimination takes place at the intraracial level, it is best known as colorism. While it benefits light-skinned non-white subjects, colorism oppresses individuals with a darker skin color, who are defined in pejorative terms, such as "non-human" or "uncultured" among others (Canaan 232). In the Black community, intra-ethnic colorism already occurred during slavery times, when light-skinned slaves assumed their superiority over their dark-skinned peers (Russell-Cole et al. 56), a haughty attitude that Ytasha Womack summarizes as "the 'better than' history of colorism, with black elitism equating lighter skin with higher status and beauty" (70). Thus, colorism is the worldwide "legacy of [European] colonialism" (Phoenix 101) that has established white hegemonic beauty standards around the globe.

In the United States, gendered colorism restricts Black women's beauty to a lightness (Russell-Cole et al. 155) rooted in a Black-white binary, Patricia Hill Collins contends, because "blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (89). However, the undermining of Black women's beauty colorism involves not only skin pigmentation. Mikki Kendall uses the term "texturism" to relate to the idea that natural black hair is inferior to other hair textures and, particularly, to white hair (103). Pursuing this line of argument, Russell-Cole et al. posit that, for African American women, hair is political (115) and that straightened hair equals respectability (121). As gendered colorism equals beauty to lightness, it equates dark-skinned Black women with ugliness, often considering them "the least attractive" (Jerkins 59). Thus, in her essay, Walker also expressed her worries about "the hatred the black woman encounters within black society" (291) as they are likely to suffer both

romantic and non-romantic marginalization in the Black community (292-293).

The colorism-beauty relationship is political, in sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom's words, "because beauty isn't actually what you look like; beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order" (44). Thus, colorism is both the outcome and the reaffirmation of white privilege because "social stratification follows color" (Russell-Cole et al. 6) and, in its connection to class, "color-class hierarchies" emerge (27). For this reason, McMillan Cottom claims that to be beautiful, Black women must retain a certain degree of whiteness (56). In this sense, gendered colorism is at the intersection of gender, race, skin color, and class, introducing the "privilege of beauty" into the equation. Originally derived from critical race theory, intersectionality theory argues that each individual "has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances" (Delgado and Stefancic 11). Race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in the 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." According to Crenshaw, intersectionality surpasses a "single-issue framework" (152) —i.e., gender or race— in the discussion of Black women's oppression. Instead, intersectionality performs a joint study of race and gender. Yet, the intersection of multiple factors when discussing Black women's subordination had been previously addressed by Black Feminists and activists, such as the Combahee River Collective who, in their 1977 Statement, claimed Black women were subjugated by "interlocking oppressions" (Taylor 15), or Deborah K. King, who proposed a multiplicative study of Black women's "multiple jeopardy" (1988). Later in the article "Mapping the Margins" (1991), Crenshaw added that "class, sexual orientation, age, and color [factors]" should be included in the equation of intersectionality (1244-1245).

Light-skinned and white-looking non-white subjects enjoy the added possibility of passing for white, which Delgado and Stefancic define as "the effort to deracinate oneself and present oneself as white" (69), taking advantage of the racial categorization based on phenotypical appearance in the United States (80). According to Floyd James Davis (1991), passing for white is a social phenomenon rooted in the one-drop rule (5). This critic posits the one-drop rule "[reflects] the nation's unique definition of what makes a person black" in the United States

(14). Allyson Hobbs (2014) defines racial passing as “a flexible strategy that relies heavily on the category of class” (30) and signals that light-skinned slaves passed for white strategically during the Antebellum period to achieve freedom, while in later periods passing was mainly used for upward social mobility (29). In “Lost Boundaries” (1995), Arthé A. Anthony explores the complexity of passing for white in New Orleans during the Jim Crow era and claims it was a “public strategy of resistance against the crises of racial repression” (297). He goes on to argue:

Although it is impossible to determine either the frequency of passing or the number of its varied manifestations, the two most prevalent forms have been described as part-time, or discontinuous passing—such as passing for white at work—and continuous passing or “crossing-over” the racial divide into a new life with a new racial identity. ... But passing was not a frivolous matter because it demanded tolerance for racism ... as well as the fear of discovery and betrayal, pressures imposed by maintaining a double life. (307)

Further, this critic emphasizes that the complexity of passing also lies in the multiple instances of real-life passing stories. Pursuing this line of argument, those who passed did so to “escape [their] economic conditions” (303) as Black, segregated, and constrained to a certain type of low-income jobs (302). Thus, passing was an “economic necessity” (307). However, not all who could pass did so, mainly because of their family and personal relations (303). And others, those who could not pass as white, would have “if passing for white had been a viable option for [them]” (304). Mirroring this real-life phenomenon, African American fiction features multiple instances of crossing the color line.

Catherine Rottenberg reports that the passing narrative emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century when African American authors started using racial passing “as a way of investigating the complexities and contradictions of the category of race in the United States” (435). Passing for white became a major theme in African American fiction published before the Second World War (Anthony 291) and reached its peak in the 1920s, mainly used to foster “[the] white audience’s awareness of the restrictions imposed upon talented

blacks who then found necessary to become white to fulfill themselves” (Christian 44). Barbara Christian highlights that traditional passing narratives “could have peculiarly feminine overtones” because often the “passer” is a Black woman who raises her civil and economic status by marrying a rich white man (45), as portrayed in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). Set in Harlem in the 1920s, this short novel revolves around two Black light-skinned childhood friends who reunite in their adulthood. Despite their shared background, as grown women their lives are disparate. Taking advantage of her fair physique, Clare Kendry passes as white and marries a rich white man, John Bellew. Thanks to her marriage, Clare materializes her new racial identity and prospers socially. Unlike Clare, Irene Redfield does not pass as white. She married a dark-skinned Black man who “couldn’t exactly ‘pass’” (Larsen 32) and is the mother to two sons who inherited their father’s dark complexion. Yet, Clare does pass for white in what Anthony calls “isolated occasions” (307) and when not in the company of her husband and children. Hobbs affirms that Larsen, who was biracial, was aware that “racial and gender identities were mutually constitutive” both in her life and fiction (201), which points to the importance of the intersection of race, gender, and class when discussing Black women’s experiences as well as passing for white in literature.

This article proposes a reading of the notions of colorism and passing as white in Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half* (2020). The novel is a female-centered and coming-of-age narrative that follows the lives of four Black women belonging to the same family from the 1960s to the 1980s through intertwined storylines. The teenage Vignes twins, Stella and Desiree, live with their widowed mother, Adele, since their father, Leon, was lynched when they were little girls. As a result of its founding father’s legacy, their hometown of Mallard, a fair-skinned Black community in the South, is obsessed with light skin. The people of Mallard, however, do not pass for white. Instead, they live apart from both their dark-skinned peers and white people, feeling superior to the former while working as domestic help for the latter. Although the twins enjoy the admiration of the entire town for their light complexion and “beauty,” they decide to run away to New Orleans at sixteen in 1954 to escape the town’s constraining atmosphere. Their relationship as sisters ends when Stella passes for white. She abandons her sister, marries her rich white boss, and has a daughter, Kennedy. In contrast,

Desiree marries a Black man who later becomes an abusive husband. To escape her marriage, Desiree returns to Mallard, in a reversal of her former flight. There she raises Jude, her dark-skinned daughter, who will be despised for her Blackness and “ugliness.” Decades later, the focus shifts to Jude and Kennedy, the twins’ daughters, exploring their lives and experiences as Black and “white.”

Through its exploration of the color complex in the Black community and passing as white, *The Vanishing Half* revisits two seminal novels from the Harlem Renaissance: Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Bennett’s novel also draws connections to Toni Morrison’s fiction, mainly *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). Yet, Morrison’s latest novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), is also significant as it echoes Morrison’s debut work (López Ramírez 175). Julia Kristeva argues that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66) and African American literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. asserts that intertextuality is essential to African American literature (1988), which he names “*Signify(ing)*.” Gates posits that “[i]f black writers read each other, they also revise each other’s texts. Thereby they become fluent in the language of tradition” (124). This paper contends that in *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett proposes a new path for twenty-first-century African American women’s fiction through the themes of colorism and racial passing in the author’s rewriting of the African American women’s literary tradition.

## 2. Of Black Women and Light Skin: Colorism in the Black Community

Russell-Cole et al. (141) connect colorism to what Joy DeGruy labelled “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” (PTSS), which understands slavery as the point of departure for the African American multigenerational trauma that fosters intraracial denigration as protection. According to DeGruy, this syndrome fosters “*appropriate* adaptation when living in a *hostile* environment” (“Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome,” 02:30-02:39, italics mine). Encouraged by appropriate adaptation, some Black families attempt to “lighten the line” (Russell-Cole et al. 145) under the belief that freedom and whiteness are the same (Walker 291). In *The Vanishing Half*, colorism is explored in retrospect, first reviewing the origins of the color complex in the Black community.

The town of Mallard (Louisiana) was founded in 1848 by Alphonse Decuir, the son of a white slave owner and a Black slave. As an enslaved child he experienced skin hatred from his mother who despised his lightness—arguably because it reminded her of her rape as sexual violence was used during slavery as “a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression” to subjugate female slaves (Davis 19-20). Being the offspring of “miscegenation” (Davis 21) and experiencing “double consciousness” (Du Bois 1903), Decuir is an American caught between the worlds of Blacks and whites. As a newly emancipated Black man, Decuir understood his light skin as a sign of superiority to other Black people, which points to an instance of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). In his understanding of light skin to be the *adaptation* needed to survive in the *hostile environment*—the white-dominated world—Decuir began a generational process of “lightening the line” to achieve a perfected Black progeny:

Mallard. ... A town that, like any other, was more idea than place. ... A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes. A third place. ... Lightness, like anything inherited at a great cost, was a lonely gift. He'd married a mulatto even lighter than himself. She was pregnant with their first child, and he imagines his 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. (Bennett 5-6)

Mallard not only allows Bennett to explore colorism and white ideals inside the Black community, but its construction as a Black Southern town with a mythical essence that does not appear on maps and which is haunted by white ideals, yet still segregated from whites, is an homage to the Black neighborhood known as the Bottom in Morrison's *Sula* (1973).

In *Sula*, the Black community lives in the neighborhood of the Bottom, segregated from Medallion, a white neighborhood. The Bottom's complex relationship with whiteness also comes from its origins as a place. Its inhabitants are the descendants of born-slaves, and they set apart pure Blacks as “truebloods” (Morrison 52) from “bad blood mixtures,” because “the origins of the mule and a mulatto were one and the same” (52).



Morrison addressed colorism through Helene Wright, the daughter of a Creole woman who passed on lightness and beauty to her children. In the neighborhood of the Bottom, there are color-class hierarchies. While Nel is “the color of wet sandpaper” (52) and enjoys a higher status, her friend Sula Peace, who is “of a heavy brown color” (52), comes from an impoverished dark-skinned single-mother family, whose grandmother lost one of her legs to get economic aid to support her children. However, once Helene is outside her Black community and explores segregated New Orleans in 1920, she is subordinated like any other Black person. In contrast to The Bottom’s locals, Mallard’s inhabitants despise dark-skinned Black men under the prejudice that they are naturally violent. As for Black women, their lightness is connected to ideals of beauty. Hence, the town of Mallard can be categorized as an assimilationist geographical location because “assimilationists constantly encourage Black adoption of White cultural traits and/or physical ideals” (Kendi 3). Decuir’s prejudices are long-lasting in time, reaffirming the perpetuation of PTSS in contemporary America because “colonized adults,” Manuela López Ramírez states, “pass feelings of self-hatred and self-disparagement down to future generations setting in motion a vicious cycle of negativity and self-annihilation” (177). Still, by 1968, in Mallard “nobody married black” (Bennett 5), a fact which reiterates both the legacy of Decuir’s ideals and how colorism affects partner choices.

Two of the protagonists of *The Vanishing Half* are the Vignes twins, Decuir’s great-great-great-granddaughters. In Mallard, Stella and Desiree are admired for their outstanding lightness, which confirms Decuir’s effective generational “lightening-the-line” that reaches its peak over one hundred years later. And so, Stella and Desiree represent the epitome of feminine beauty: “Twin girls, creamy skin, hazel eyes, wavy hair. He [Decuir] would have marveled at them. For the child to be a little more perfect than the parents. What could be more wonderful than that?” (Bennett 6). Bennett revisits beauty ideals in the Black community by drawing influences from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Hurston’s novel is a masterpiece that is often highlighted as the turning point for the African American women’s canon as it “revised the mulatta images that had preceded her and the way toward the presentation of more varied and complex women characters” (Christian 57). Bennett’s treatment of gendered colorism is straightforward, though it becomes more complex as it parallels scenes

from Hurston's novel. For instance, in *Their Eyes*, Joe used to finger Janie's long black hair during their first year of marriage, fascinated by its beauty. But over time, her hair becomes a source of jealousy. Her waterfall-like black hair provokes lust in other men and he finally forces her to pin it up (Hurston 62), demonstrating his power over her. In *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett includes a parallel scene: "Early loved her [Desiree's] hair, so she always paid it special attention. Once, Jude had seen him ease up behind her mother and bury his face in a handful of hair" (Bennett 90). This scene makes Jude realize as a child that "good" hair is a symbol of desirability for Black women, causing a sense of uneasiness in her, doubting if she would rather be "the beautiful or the beholding" (90). Aware of her looks, Jude realizes what she lacks, not having inherited her mother's essence—the "*Thing*" that also made Maureen Peal beautiful in *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison 72). Moreover, Bennett pays homage to *Their Eyes* in her discussion of domestic violence and Black women's skin color. When Desiree remembers the beatings she received from her husband, she realizes her light skin works like a white canvas that exposes the violence exerted on her body: "Nobody has warned her of this as a girl, when they carried on over her beautiful light complexion. How easily her skin would wear the mark of an angry man" (Bennett 50). This scene evokes Sop-de-Bottom's words when he tells Tea Cake that he envies him for Janie's lightness, because "You can't make no mark on 'em [dark-skinned women] at all" (Hurston 168). In this light, Bennett reverses Sop-de-Bottom's romanticization of light skin by placing the perspective not on beauty, but on the pain it represents for Desiree.

Bennett's novel also pays attention to the pain colorism causes to dark-skinned Black girls, as Toni Morrison does in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Pecola's traumatic experiences inside her Black community end with her obsession with having blue eyes which, according to Marilyn Sander Mobley, "equals a desire for love" (89). I would further contend that Pecola's desire for love is connected to her dark complexion, which qualifies her as ugly and, therefore, unlovable. Indeed, her "ugliness" is stressed in the novel as the main reason for her marginalization (Morrison 43). Just like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and Lula Ann in *God Help the Child* (2015), Jude suffers constant discrimination and marginalization by children and adults alike as the only dark-skinned girl in Mallard. While Pecola is harassed by a group of boys who call

her “Black e mo” (Morrison 1970, 63), and while Lula Ann is ridiculed through racist monkey jokes (Morrison 2015, 56), Jude is nicknamed “Tar Baby” and other names in allusion to her skin color (Bennett 84). Jude’s dark skin shade is overtly exposed through an enumeration of elements that reinforces her absolute Blackness and foregrounds her “otherness” in Mallard:

She was black. Blueblack. No, so black she looked purple. Black as coffee, asphalt, outer space, black as the beginning and the end of the world. ... A black dot in the school pictures, a dark speck on the pews at Sunday Mass, a shadow lingering on the riverbank while the other children swam. So black that you could see nothing but her. A fly in milk, contaminating everything. (84)

The last line symbolizes Jude’s overall experience: she is the parasite of the perfect whiteness that took generations to achieve, becoming the absolute “Other” and, in contrast to her mother and aunt, epitomizes Mallard’s notion of ugliness. Hegemonic westernized beauty standards may cause what Ronald E. Hall coined “the Bleaching Syndrome” in 1990. According to Hall, this syndrome is a response to racial domination that has prompted a part of the African American community to “internalize light skin and other dominant race characteristics as the ideal point of reference for normal assimilation into American society” (100). Therefore, light skin is not only the appropriate adaptation needed to survive but also the appropriate adaptation required to be beautiful. In a quest for white beauty ideals, nineteenth-century Black women started using toxic and homemade ointments to market brands, such as Nadinola, to lighten their skin (Russell-Cole et al. 69-71). Enchanted by a Nadinola advertisement that states “*Life is more fun when your complexion is velar, bright, Nadinola-light*” (Bennett 106), Jude attempts to lighten her skin to get rid of her “endless black” (106). With the help of her grandmother, she uses homemade skin-bleaching ointments, simulating Pecola’s desire for blue eyes when she devours Mary Jane’s candy (Morrison 48). However, like Pecola, she cannot escape her Blackness.

Nevertheless, in *The Vanishing Half*, the mother-daughter relationship is used to overcome the negative impact of colorism on a little girl’s self-esteem. When Desiree returns to Mallard with Jude, she is judged as the real “race traitor” instead of Stella: the rumoring local voices

utter “Playing white to get ahead was just good sense. But marrying a dark man? Carrying his blueback child? Desiree Vignes had courted the type of trouble that would never leave” (Bennett 59). From the town of Mallard’s perspective, passing as white and marrying white is not a “shameful act” as in some African American families (Piper 10) or an abomination as in Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), whose protagonist is accused of the “unforgivable thing” (Morrison 112)—that is, having sexual intercourse with white men—but corrupting Decuir’s “lightening the line” with pure Black blood. Mallard locals and Stella alienate the daughter from her mother, thus echoing Sweetness’ fear in Morrison’s *God Help the Child* (2015), who asks her dark-skinned daughter, Lula Ann, to call her by her first name instead of “mother” because “[i]t was safer” (Morrison 6). Likewise, in *The Vanishing Half*, Mallard residents doubt Desiree and Jude’s blood relation because of their contrasting skin color, a reality which even Stella struggles to accept: “The dark girl couldn’t be Desiree’s daughter. She looked nothing like her. Pure black, like Desiree had never even touched her. She could be anyone” (Bennett 253). To reverse this external estrangement, Bennett established a bond of love between Desiree and Jude. Unlike Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* who neglects her daughter by looking after the Fisher girl instead, and unlike Sweetness in *God Help the Child* who is embarrassed by her daughter’s skin pigmentation and avoids physical touch, Desiree’s motherly love prevents Jude from falling into madness like Pecola or committing a false child abuse accusation like Lula Ann. In this regard, López Ramírez holds that “in a colonized community, marginal subjects are condemned to despairing ostracism” (178). In this way, Bennett transcends the internalized racism that is transmitted in the Black community from parents to children in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* and puts Mallard’s assimilationist legacy and generational trauma to an end through the mother-daughter relationship, ultimately freeing Jude from Pecola and Lula Ann’s chains.

Bennett transcends Pecola’s tragic ending and, following her mother and aunt’s steps, Jude finally leaves Mallard in 1978 on her way to UCLA. She attends medical school there and begins a romantic relationship with Reese, a transsexual Black man who struggles to accept his own skin and scars, but who finds Jude’s black skin beautiful. As the narrative develops, there is a notable uplifting of her self-esteem while she explores the white world. Although in Mallard, “she never dared

to swim in the river—imagine showing so much of yourself” (125), in the end, Jude is no longer ashamed of her skin. On the day of her grandmother’s funeral, she dares to swim naked for the first time in the river that runs through Mallard, an ultimate act of liberation and a scene that stands for a baptism of self-acceptance, as river water in the African American tradition is “baptismal in nature” (Wardi 64). Thus, Jude’s transformation and return to Mallard parallels Sula’s, who, Karen F. Stein posits, has grown into an “antithesis of her society’s codes” (147). The novel closes with the following lines, which echo Langston Hughes’ poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1920) about Black ancestry and memory: “This river, like all rivers, remembered its course. They [Reese and Jude] floated under the leafy canopy trees, begging to forget” (Bennett 343). Ultimately, Bennett’s stance against intraracial skin discrimination involves the destruction of Mallard, echoing the collapse of the neighborhood of the Bottom in *Sula*.

### 3. Passing for White: *The Vanishing Half* as a Rewriting of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*

As in Nella Larsen’s classic novel with this title (1929), passing as white is at the core of Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half*. This article will discuss Bennett’s novel as a rewriting of *Passing* by focusing on several parallelisms between them. One notable change in Bennett’s novel is the shift in the protagonists’ relationships, which develops from Clare and Irene’s friendship to Stella and Desiree’s relationship as siblings. If, according to Bennett, *Passing* denounces race and racism as social farces and presents race as “slippery, uneasy and unstable” (Bennett, “Performance”), her decision to make her protagonists not only sisters but twins—sharing the same blood and physique—enriches Larsen’s commentary. In *The Vanishing Half*, the twins function as contemporary adaptations of Larsen’s protagonists. On the one hand, Stella Vignes is modelled on Clare Kendry. Like her literary forerunner, Stella passes for white and marries a wealthy white man, Blake Sanders. No longer a Vignes but a Sanders, Stella benefits from social mobility and white privilege. So, *The Vanishing Half* maintains the feminine accent of female-centered traditional passing narratives. On the other hand, like Irene Redfield, Desiree does not pass. Instead, she marries a dark-skinned Black man and bears “his blueback child” (5), Jude. Hence,

their families ultimately dictate their racial subordination. The social mobility enjoyed only by Clare and Stella emphasizes the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and class. As Black women, their access to social privilege and wealth is only possible through, first, a shift in their racial identity via passing for white, and secondly, through a heterosexual marriage with a wealthy white man. As Morrison wrote in *Sula*, “[b]ecause [Sula and Nel] had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about something else to be” (52); in their case, Clare and Stella had set to be “white” women. Like Sula, the aims to create her own self away from the neighborhood of the Bottom and its white-gendered ideals (92), Stella performs her own rebirth as a white woman and imagines herself “new and clean as a baby” (Bennett 187). Ironically, only by leaving Mallard, does Stella fully access the white world Mallard locals desire and simulate.

The intertextual connections between Clare and Stella are more complex than the act of passing. For instance, both characters are regarded as performers in these novels. In *Passing*, when Irene thinks of Clare, she has the feeling that “Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps—that is, not too consciously—but, none the less, acting” (Larsen 48). Likewise, in *The Vanishing Half*, the omniscient narrator elicits the following about Stella’s performance: “All there was to being white was acting like you were” (Bennett 75). In addition, both women share an unstable relationship with other Black women. Clare Kendry plays a dangerous game when she meets Irene and Gertrude—both Black and light-skinned—in the presence of John, who is unaware of their race. Their company satisfies Clare’s need to be herself. Similarly, Stella cannot avoid befriending Loretta Walker, the mother of the rich Black family that moves to her white neighborhood. Although at first Stella feels aversion towards the Walker family, afraid that her secret might be discovered, she develops an emotional dependency on Loretta quickly. In this way, Irene, Gertrude, and Loretta’s company relieve the passer’s pain caused by their rootlessness. Furthermore, their passing is at first encouraged by external agents. In *Passing*, Clare Kendry is the daughter of a white man and a Black woman. She was raised by her white aunts, who forced her to keep her Blackness in secret. In *The Vanishing Half*, a young Stella is first misperceived as white in a shop because of her physical appearance, which underscores the “pervasiveness and

irrationality of racial classification” (Anthony 301) because if race were a biological quality and not a social construction, its performance or confusion would be unimaginable and unattainable. Later, she is once again misperceived as white during her job interview at the Maison Blanche, when she decides to pass for white, as she would never get the job presenting herself as colored, an episode which relates to Anthony’s revision of passing in New Orleans. In the end, both Clare and Stella decide to cross the color line voluntarily. However, Stella’s passing is further explored. It is not only an economic necessity or the ambition of upward social mobility, but the only escape she found from her trauma and pain, originating in her witnessing their father’s lynching when she was just a little girl, and, years later, her being sexually abused by Mr. Dupont, their white boss. Although colorism favors the preferential treatment of light-skinned Black women, because of the fetishization of their bodies, they have historically faced the added jeopardy of sexual harassment since slavery (Hills Collins 91-92; Russell-Cole et al. 157). Reminiscent of sexual coercion as an expression of racial power, Stella’s sexual vulnerability as a Black woman follows the cycle that started with her great-great-great-great grandmother—Decuir’s enslaved mother. Only through her marriage is Stella respected and protected because she is both white and “Blake’s girl” (Bennett 187), no longer objectified through the male gaze, either white or Black, and no longer vulnerable to other men’s lust.

Likewise, in *The Vanishing Half* as in *Passing*, motherhood is a significant theme. The birth of a dark-skinned baby would expose the “passer” and her secret, and it would condemn the child to the race the mother once tried to escape. Aware of this predicament, Clare confesses feeling terrified during her pregnancy: “I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I’ll never risk it again. Never!” (Larsen 31). Her fear is understandable in the light of texts like Kate Chopin’s “Désiree’s Baby,” which addresses the consequences for a white woman who gives birth to a dark-skinned baby. Clare’s concern is shared by Stella, whose fears are exposed by the narrator: “The idea of pregnancy terrified her; she imagines pushing out a baby that grew darker and darker. Blake recoiling in horror. She almost preferred him to think she’d had an affair with a Negro” (151). Through their fears, both women reveal their intraracial racism and sense of superiority.

While Clare correlates her daughter's whiteness to turning "all right" as if Blackness would have been a defect, Stella prefers being considered an unfaithful partner to coming out as Black.

Stella and Kennedy's mother-daughter relationship is of utmost importance as it fills the void of Clare-Marguery's relationship in *Passing* as well as serving to emphasize the conflict of biracial identities. Unlike Clare, who fears John's reaction if he ever discovers her secret, Stella is not afraid of her husband's reaction but of her daughter's. Thus, Kennedy serves to enrich the traditional passing narrative, further exploring the impact of racial passing on future generations. Despite Stella's attempts, Kennedy finally discovers the truth:

"I am not a Negro," she [Kennedy] said. ...

"Well, your mother is," she [Jude] said.

"So?"

"So that makes you one too." (Bennett 296)

In the end, Stella's passing affects Kennedy's sense of identity. When Kennedy finally accepts that her entire life has been a farce, she undergoes an existential crisis because she feels alienated from both races. Ironically, Kennedy inherits her mother's acting abilities and becomes a professional actor who only plays white characters on stage. Like her mother, Kennedy soon starts lying about her life in a quest to understand her racial identity:

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 the border. She was always inventing her life. (298-99)

The paradox of this resolution is that if Stella passes as white for social mobility, Kennedy reverses her mother's choice and passes as Black when she impersonates Jude, lying about going to medical school and having a boyfriend named Reese. Kennedy has everything a traditional passing character would desire—whiteness and wealth—and yet that does not relieve her lost sense of identity. Kennedy's "passing as Jude" is



a reversal of the traditional passing narrative and a refusal to idolize one race over others.

Traditional female-centered “passing narratives” also present what is better known as “the tragic mulatta trope.” First used in abolitionist writing, the figure of the tragic mulatta allowed writers to introduce a Black character that would be seen as respectable by the white readership for their whiteness (Fox-Genovese 799-800). In most literary and cinematographic representations, as Pilgrim notes, the mulatta character was doomed to a tragic fate:

If light enough to “pass” as white, she did, but passing led to deeper self-loathing. She pitied or despised blacks and the “blackness” in herself; she hated or feared whites yet desperately sought their approval. In a race-based society, the tragic mulatto found peace only in death. She evoked pity or scorn, not sympathy. (“The Tragic Mulatto Myth”)

Whether Clare decides to take her own life or it is Irene who defenestrates her, Clare’s death is a punishment connected to her passing and, at the same time, her only liberation after the discovery of her secret. Whereas Clare becomes a “tragic mulatta,” Bennett transcends this trope imposed on Black women. Stella’s secret is not publicly exposed, and she continues to pass as white, thus avoiding the “tragic mulatta” category. In this regard, Eve A. Raimon alleges that the subversion of the myth of the tragic mulatta from contemporary passing novels is the result of 1980s feminism, as it rejected hegemonic sexist stereotypes from nineteenth-century fiction (25). However, two decades before Bennett’s novel, Danzy Senna had already outperformed the tragic mulatta trope in *Caucasia* (1998) because Birdie, the biracial protagonist who was forced to pass by her white mother, “survives unlike the ‘tragic mulattoes’ of earlier periods” (Schur 240). Nonetheless, by refusing to include this gendered and racist trope, Bennett manages not to, in Anthony’s words, “misread the history of American race relations” (310). Even if Stella is to be read as a contemporary version of Clare, Bennett made Stella a multidimensional character. Eventually, Stella adopts the mindset of a white supremacist, forgetting her real roots. Like the racist John Bellew in *Passing* —who openly proclaims his hatred towards the Black community, uses the “n-word” assiduously, and even pet names his wife “Nig”— Stella, after seeing her daughter

playing with the Walker daughter, warns her: “we [whites] don’t play with niggers” (Bennett 165). By thinking herself white and using the “n-word,” Stella echoes John Bellew’s outlook. Stella’s attitude is not just racist but an instance of self-hatred (Piper 19-20). Later, she realizes the damaging effect of her words when Kennedy repeats them during a tantrum when playing with the Walker girl: “Stella stared into her daughter’s face, seeing everyone that she had ever hated” (Bennett 199). Hence, the only resemblance between Stella and a traditional tragic mulatta is her attitude of superiority and the scorn she shows towards her own race. Exceeding the trope’s tragic ending, Stella continues passing, which confirms her rebirth as a white woman.

#### 4. Conclusion

Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is a mesmerizing novel that explores the color complex inside the Black community and passing as white from a female perspective. Through its treatment of colorism and “passing,” *The Vanishing Half* shows its thematic intertextuality with seminal novels written by Black women writers. As a literary mosaic, *The Vanishing Half* draws multiple influences from several Black women writers. The novel’s focus on the preferential treatment of light-skinned Black females inside small and rural Black communities recalls Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), as well as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). Although the Black communities of these novels are fictional, they represent the broader Black community in the United States, which has internalized white ideals and beliefs for centuries. In the same manner, Bennett employs Mallard as her particular fictional Black world to address gendered colorism, pointing directly to what Walker articulated as “the hatred the black black woman encounters within black society” (291). The novel aptly explores the politics of colorism and Bennett’s contribution to the canon is its redemption of Pecola Breedlove through the counter-narrative of Jude, in her refusal to support intraracial racism. In the wake of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), in *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett creates multidimensional female characters, portraying a Black community that requires introspection, and continues the traditional sisterhood plot in which Black women can either support or betray each other. In addition, Bennett recasts Nel and Sula’s sisterhood into a real sibling relationship,

that of Stella and Desiree, which also emphasizes the color line. *The Vanishing Half* is a retelling of Larsen's *Passing*, in that, Bennett, like Larsen before her, publicly denounces the senseless fallacy of race and racial prejudices in her fiction by exploring racial passing to transverse social structures. In addition, by transcending the trope of the tragic mulatta, Bennett redeems Clare Kendry through Stella's counter-story. Instead of giving importance to the discovery of the act of passing as in traditional passing narratives, Bennett problematizes the question of racial identity for those who are racially ambiguous, like Kennedy. Through its treatment of colorism and passing as white accompanied by the paralleling of scenes and the rewriting of characters, Bennett's text employs revision, assimilation, and pastiche, and her novel ultimately emerges as a unique piece of fiction. Overall, *The Vanishing Half* proposes a fresh path for twenty-first-century African American women's fiction in its continuation, rewriting, and updating of African American women's literary tradition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Particularly in the *Harlem Renaissance* context, a landmark period for African American literature, music and culture in the 1920s. In George Hutchinson's words: "What is commonly called the Harlem Renaissance today was known as the Negro Renaissance in its own time. 'Negro': a word of pride, of strong vowels and a capital N. The thick diagonal strode forward and put its foot down. 'Negro' no longer signifies to most people what it did in the early to mid-twentieth century" (1).

<sup>2</sup> The term "biracial" applies to mixed-race individuals whose parents belong to different races. As for Nella Larsen's biological parents, her mother was Danish and her father was a Black West Indian. "Unlike most African Americans," Hobbs notes, "Larsen did not trace her ancestry to the American South or to the long history of Southern slavery, but rather to the Dutch West Indies and to Denmark (198).

<sup>3</sup> Claudia MacTeer, the main narrator in *The Bluest Eye*, explains that the "Black e mo" epithet was a direct reference to Pecola's skin color. As Claudia remarks, "[i]t was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth" (Morrison 63).

<sup>4</sup> As this critic goes on to argue, in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), river water is "healing, renewing, and, most significantly, transformative" (Wardi 65).

<sup>5</sup> After the collapse, by 1965, the Bottom was no longer inhabited by the Black community: “It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. ... Maybe it hadn’t been a community, but it had been a place” (Morrison 1973, 166). In 1981 Mallard ceases to exist, incorporated into the nearby town of Palmetto after a census. As Decuir once imagined, it had been more an idea than a place and, as such, it “couldn’t be redefined by geographical terms” (Bennett 303).

<sup>6</sup> In Kate Chopin’s short story “Désirée’s Baby” (1892), Désirée is an innocent victim of the one-drop rule punished for another woman’s undiscovered passing. Désirée’s fate is repeated in *God Help the Child* (2015), when Louis accuses Sweetness of cheating because of Lula Ann’s skin color and abandons them.

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy’s “passing as Jude” should not be understood as an instance of the so-called “Black fishing,” which is assuming to be Black when white.

<sup>8</sup> In *Passing*, John’s pet name for Clare is “Nig” because when they married “she was as white as – as – well as white as a lily” (Larsen 35). However, due to the apparent darkening of her skin shade, he advises his wife to “look out, [or] she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger” (35). Reminiscent of John’s words, in *The Vanishing Half*, Desiree sarcastically points out that for Stella, it would be the end of the world if Kennedy ever discovered “she ain’t so lily white—” (Bennett 322).

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