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Defying the Binaries of Passing in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

Maaïke Siemes

Brit Bennett's 2020 novel, *The Vanishing Half* explores the effects of passing on African American identity during the segregation era in the United States. "Passing" is a survival strategy to escape often-violent imposed social categories, such as race, gender or sexuality. Individuals are often perceived and accepted as members of a certain category based on their physical appearance and their environment. Changing appearance, location, speech, or clothing can therefore be an attempt to move into a different social category.¹ While the term passing emerges from the context of a society that seeks to preserve those social categories as meaningful, and can therefore have pejorative connotations, in this essay I am interested in how passing can showcase the performative nature of social categories. As the historian Allyson Hobbs has argued, interrogating acts of passing creates the opportunity to unpack the social construction of race, revealing how this construct is performed rather than preexistent as a set of epistemologically verifiable categories.² Following Hobbs, passing showcases the extent to which identity is constructed through the performance of certain socially agreed signifiers. Throughout this essay, however, I am alert to the ways in which passing also accepts these signifiers as meaningful signs of identity and therefore risks reinscribing essentialist notions of race and class.³ I will therefore study passing in *The Vanishing Half* to explore how the practice can both critique and reinforce the social construct of race, ultimately arguing that

¹ Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 8.

² *Ibid.*

³ Nerad, *Passing Interest*, 10.

Bennett's novel can offer a path to escaping this binary around the notion of passing.

The Vanishing Half revolves around Stella and Desiree Vignes, identical twins who grow up in Mallard, Louisiana, during the 1960s. The residents of Mallard all aim to marry people with a lighter skin color, attempting to ensure that each generation has a lighter complexion than the previous one. Stella and Desiree eventually split up and live separate lives; a life in which Stella decides to pass as white and Desiree does not. Through a close reading of the novel, I will show how it frames the act of passing. First, I will analyze Stella to examine how the novel frames passing as an act that can reinforce a hierarchy based on the construct of race. Subsequently, I will focus on how Desiree and other citizens of Mallard undermine the social construct of race. When analyzing these characters, I will not only consider them in isolation but also place them in relation to their social and geographic environments to examine how their surroundings affect their decisions.

As Bennett's novel was released only recently, it has received only limited scholarly attention. Ohad Reznick's "Getting into Character: Racial Passing and the Limitations of Performativity and Performance in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*" presents the most sustained engagement to date. Reznick argues that the novel challenges the idea that the act of passing confirms racial identities.⁴ Building on this work, I provide a more in-depth analysis of racial performativity in the novel by considering the characters of Desiree and Kennedy, Stella's Daughter. I also examine the sensory aspects of the deconstructive potential within passing. I will examine these aspects of *The Vanishing Half* with an eye toward invisible assumptions about race, such as certain dialects and social associations. For its theoretical framework, this article draws upon Homi Bhabha's mimicry theory to consider passing as a form of

⁴ "Getting into Character," 270.

mimicry.⁵ Furthermore, I engage with Jullie Cary Nerad's work on passing narratives in American novels and films and Allyson Hobbs's work on historical passing narratives.

The work of Hobbs provides an important theoretical background for this research. Hobbs argues that passing is historically a means to secure freedom and a way to survive and fit into the prescribed norms set by society.⁶ During the antebellum period and the Jim Crow era in the United States, passing as white could be a way to escape slavery, racial prejudice, or other forms of racial degradation. Black people passed deliberately to escape systemic racism in the United States. Since liberty can be claimed through passing, it is a performance that potentially provides agency to the passer.⁷ Nerad adds that individuals can also pass situationally, for convenience, or to gain access to spaces otherwise closed to them.⁸ Hobbs suggests that passing is always an act of rebellion since it challenges the social construct of race within a hegemonic society.⁹ Passing demonstrates that identities are constructed categories that can be performative. Moreover, it disturbs the expectations of people who want to base identity on visual signifiers linked to race.¹⁰ An analysis of passing exposes the unreliability of assumed visual signifiers and the flaw in using them to construct identity.¹¹ In this manner, it defies essentialist notions that someone's identity reveals "one true self", hiding inside the many other, more superficial . . .

⁵ The decision to analyze passing vis-à-vis Bhabha's theory is made because passing involves a form of mimicry; the tension inherent in the act of passing is to some extent similar to the ambiguity within Bhabha's concept of mimicry, as it simultaneously involves internalization and parody. Therefore, although colonialism and the Jim Crow South are two different systems, Dimple Godiwala emphasizes that Bhabha's theories can be applied to "any hierarchized subject who perceives the values of another group as superior to his or her own and aspires to the ideologically constructed behaviour, attitudes, and culture of that group." "Postcolonial Desire," 61.

⁶ *Id.*, 31.

⁷ Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 8.

⁸ Nerad, *Passing Interest*, 8-10.

⁹ Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 8.

¹⁰ Nerad, *Passing Interest*, 8-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

‘selves.’”¹² According to essentialist definitions, a person’s essential identity is determined according to their skin color, biological sex, or other physical characteristics.

Postcolonial theory, however, reframes identity as something fluid and mutable. Stuart Hall, for example, argues that identity is both a matter of “becoming” and a matter of “being.”¹³ To be more precise, one’s identity is created through one’s personal history and cultural background. Simultaneously, one’s sense of identity is continually transformed by life experiences.¹⁴ Neraud notes that the definition of passing “paradoxically undercuts and reinscribes an anti-essentialist position.”¹⁵ On the one hand, passing demonstrates that identities are performed. On the other hand, successful passing as white requires that passers overperform “classifications which have historically been assigned on biological heritage and the body.”¹⁶ To escape notice, the passer must assimilate assumptions about the characteristics of particular racial identities.¹⁷

Passing on America’s White Ideals

The plot of *The Vanishing Half* revolves around the identical twins: Stella and Desiree Vignes. Throughout the novel, the twins are juxtaposed in Stella’s decision to pass as white and Desiree’s decision not to pass. This juxtaposition highlights the extent to which Stella’s act is a consequence of her internalization of colorism, a form of discrimination in which people with a lighter skin tone are treated more favorably than people with a darker skin tone.¹⁸ Colorism preserves whiteness as the ideal of beauty and upholds a social hierarchy based on race.¹⁹

Although both sisters grew up in Mallard, Stella internalizes the village’s “colorstruck” ideologies while Desiree actively resists

¹² Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Id.*, 222–5.

¹⁵ *Passing Interest*, 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 6.

¹⁸ National Conference for Community and Justice, “Colorism.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

them.²⁰ In Mallard, a light skin is seen as a “gift,” and the ideal of whiteness is promoted in school.²¹ For instance, during the Founder’s Day picnic of the school, speeches are given by the teachers about Alphonse Decuir, the founder of Mallard, and his ideology. Alphonse’s ideas center around the creation of “a more perfect Negro [sic].”²² This phrase echoes the preamble of the United States Constitution: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form *a more perfect Union*, establish Justice.”²³ Paralleling the preamble of the constitution, the phrase emphasizes that lightness of skin is inscribed in the “civic identity” of Mallard. Additionally, the twins “grew up hearing stories about folks who’d pretended to be white.”²⁴ In these stories, passing is perceived by Stella as “funny” and even “heroic.”²⁵ In this manner, the girls are indoctrinated with the idea that having a light skin is beautiful and desirable. Moreover, growing up in Mallard teaches the girls that “whiteness” has practical advantages.²⁶ That Stella internalizes these views can be concluded from the first time she enters Darlene’s Charms shop, which is for white people only. In this passage, she enters the shop without changing her voice, gestures, clothing, or hair. However, because the shop is for white people only, the cashier perceives her as white, allowing Stella to purchase items that are otherwise unavailable to her. According to the omniscient narrator, this makes her act “practical, so practical that, at the time, her decision seemed laughably obvious.”²⁷ Stella’s passing as white in the shop demonstrates that racial categories are constructed, emerging not from a set of verifiable signifiers but imposed on those signifiers in arbitrary ways. A few years later, after Stella and Desiree have run away from Mallard, Stella takes a secretary job in New Orleans

²⁰ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 23.

²¹ *Id.*, 6.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ National Archives, *The Constitution of the United States*, emphasis mine.

²⁴ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ When using “whiteness” in this context, I am referring to the assumptions of the society of the time about what whiteness entails, rather than suggesting that whiteness and Blackness can be located as verifiable categories within the world.

²⁷ Bennet, *The Vanishing Half*, 250.

intended for white people only. After holding the job for half a year, Stella decides to leave Desiree behind for good. Stella makes this decision because of practicality and because she meets Blake Sanders, her future husband. She and Blake start a relationship in which she starts to benefit from the privileges of his whiteness: he is respected, and he offers elevated social and economic stability. Stella's benefit from these privileges, in combination with her internalization of Mallard's colorism, cause her to perform more committedly the assumed social signifiers of whiteness.

In contrast, Desiree resists colorist assumptions. As a child, Desiree "rolled her eyes" at the mention of Mallard's founder rather than listen to speeches about him.²⁸ Likewise, when Desiree learns the history of Mallard, she decides that she does not want "to be a part of the town that was her birthright. How she felt like you could flick away history like shrugging a hand off your shoulder."²⁹ It becomes evident that Desiree tries to ignore the topic of colorism when people talk about it. "[E]veryone's obsession with lightness" is the reason why Desiree wants to run away from Mallard: "They funny down there. Colorstruck. That's why I left."³⁰ Furthermore, Desiree resists these ideals of colorism after leaving the village by marrying "the darkest man she could find."³¹ In this act, she consciously opposes Mallard's colorism since "in Mallard nobody married dark."³² Desiree's resistance to racist ideals draws attention to Stella's internalization of them. Stella's decision to perform whiteness, with its subsequent painful consequences, is emphasized through the omniscient narrator's shifts in focalization between Stella and Desiree's narratives. Moreover, the fact that the two protagonists are identical twins emphasizes the social construction of colorism and race even more.

Throughout the novel, Stella performs race and class roles traditionally assigned to white upper-class women. For instance, she adjusts her dialect from African American Vernacular English

²⁸ *Id.*, 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Id.*, 10 and 23.

³¹ *Id.*, 4.

³² *Id.*, 5.

(AAVE) to General American English.³³ As Frantz Fanon has argued, speech can “measure” how people culturally adapt: by speaking a language, one adopts a culture.³⁴ At the beginning of the novel, Stella speaks AAVE. When the twins are starting a job in the Dixie Laundry factory, just after running away, Stella comments: “I don’t care how many toilets I got to jump in. . . . I ain’t goin back to Mallard.”³⁵ Apart from using the word *ain’t* (here for “am not”), which is a typical feature of AAVE, Stella pronounces the word *going* not with a velar nasal at the end, but with an alveolar nasal (like in the word *nasal* itself). This is frequent in AAVE, and in almost all Southern American English varieties, and is known as *g*-dropping because the final *g* is not written to represent this change (although no actual sound is dropped in the pronunciation).³⁶ In addition, Stella leaves out the auxiliary verb *have* in “I got to jump in.”³⁷ She also leaves out the copula in “White folks, so easy to fool!”³⁸ These are also common features in AAVE.³⁹ Stella uses language differently after she decides to pass, speaking with different features. Desiree also notes this change during their reunion at the end of the novel: “‘You talk different now,’ Desiree said. ‘What do you mean?’ Stella said. ‘Like that. Wut do you mean. How’d you learn to talk like that?’ Stella paused, then smiled. ‘Television,’ she said. ‘I used to watch hours of it. Just to learn how to sound like them.’”⁴⁰ Desiree points out that Stella speaks in a different variety pronouncing “what” like “wut,” which is common in General American English. Stella’s reply also emphasizes that she actively learned how to sound like white upper-class Americans.

³³ AAVE is a variety of English which is primarily spoken by working and middle-class African Americans. This variety exhibits many similarities with Southern American varieties in terms of phonology and syntax. In this sense, this dialect is a result of intersections between geography, social class, and the community. Thomas, “Phonological and Phonetic Characteristics,” 452.

³⁴ *Black Skin*, 92.

³⁵ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 63.

³⁶ Yuan and Liberman, “‘g-dropping’ in American English.”

³⁷ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 63.

³⁸ *Id.*, 78.

³⁹ Thomas, “Phonological and Phonetic Characteristics of African American Vernacular English,” 450.

⁴⁰ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 360.

Stella's passing can be usefully understood through Bhabha's theory of mimicry. Bhabha suggests that colonization sets up a hierarchy of cultures, creating the conditions in which the colonized begin to mimic certain aspects of the colonizer's culture, although in so doing he also suggests that the colonized can begin to deconstruct that very cultural hierarchy.⁴¹ In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella internalizes colorism and, as a result, takes over certain language characteristics traditionally assigned to upper-class white women. Moreover, Stella's word choices reveal that she has started to mimic beliefs in negative stereotypes about African Americans. She often calls her daughter Kennedy "darling" instead of "honey," which she uses at the beginning of the novel to refer to Desiree.⁴² Additionally, Stella describes Kennedy's acting as "marvelous" and "lovely."⁴³ These words, commonly associated with a higher social class, reflect Stella's rise in social class status and alienation from her previous life in Mallard. Besides, after Jude confronts Stella with the truth at the theater in Los Angeles, Stella describes Jude, Desiree's daughter, as "that dark girl [who] emerged from the shadows" and the "dark girl [that kept on] creeping up."⁴⁴ These words articulate Stella's belief in racist stereotypes about African Americans. Stella imagines Jude as a Black girl waiting in the shadows to creep up and blackmail her. This belief is based only on the color of Jude's skin, which Stella immediately associates with negative stereotypes about Black people. In this case, the stereotype is that African Americans steal from white women: "Maybe this girl thought she could come to California and threaten to expose Stella. Blackmail her, even!"⁴⁵ Although Stella showcases the performative nature of racial identity in her act of passing, to do so she has started to accept essentialist notions of African Americans, reinscribing stereotypes from the dominant white culture.

In this sense, Stella's mimicry has a negative impact on the African American characters in the novel. Rather than Bhabha's

⁴¹ Godiwala, "Postcolonial Desire," 61.

⁴² Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 287, 12.

⁴³ *Id.*, 287.

⁴⁴ *Id.*, 284, 288.

⁴⁵ *Id.*, 284.

performative mimicry, it is a mimicry that thoroughly integrates the hegemonic structures of the colonizer.⁴⁶ As Dimple Godiwala argues, the colonized can either mock and question the dominant structures of Western colonialism or internalize the colonizer's values and beliefs so thoroughly as to repeat the hegemonic structures of colonial discourse.⁴⁷ In this second form of mimicry, the colonized person preserves the hierarchies of Western power by unconsciously internalizing the colonizer's insidious values.⁴⁸ Godiwala argues that this can happen easily, such that mimicry has become dangerous. Racist ideologies now become embedded in the attitudes of the colonized, who repeat that same attitude towards the same non-white people they represent.⁴⁹

Through Stella's thorough performance of whiteness, she reinscribes a racial hierarchy and enforces it on other African Americans. When Reggie, Loretta, and Cindy Walker, an African American family, want to move into Stella's white neighborhood, she is the most "fervent" objector at an "emergency Homeowners Association meeting."⁵⁰ During the meeting, Stella "gripped the room" with her speech, even though "she [normally] never spoke up in their meetings" and "wasn't one for demonstrating."⁵¹ Stella's intense need to speak up at the meeting demonstrates her commitment to hindering the integration of the Black family into the neighborhood. It also emphasizes how Stella tries to reinforce the segregation of white neighborhoods from colored neighborhoods. Although Stella also wants to block the family's presence in fear that they could uncover and reveal that she is secretly passing, in doing so she actively preserves the dominant ideology of Jim Crow.

Moreover, Stella teaches this white supremacist ideology to her daughter, Kennedy. Through Stella's focalization of the narrative, readers learn that Kennedy is not allowed to play with Cindy after the Walker family eventually does move into the

⁴⁶ Godiwala, "Postcolonial Desire," 62-3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*, 63.

⁴⁹ *Id.*, 66.

⁵⁰ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 164-5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

neighborhood. When Stella catches the girls playing dolls together, “[s]he’d stormed across the street and grabbed her daughter’s arm, both girls gaping as she dragged Kennedy back into the house.”⁵² Once inside, Stella uses a racial epithet to explain to Kennedy why she should not play with Cindy.⁵³ After this passage in the novel, the narration shifts in time to Stella’s childhood and reminds the reader how a woman once discriminated against Stella as she played with a white neighbor. Even though Stella was once forbidden from playing with a white girl, she reiterates what the white mother said to her when she was younger and teaches the same ideas about Black people to her daughter. Stella’s mimicry of the white mother emphasizes that she has internalized white supremacy. Later on in the novel, Kennedy repeats these ideas to Cindy, reminding Cindy that she does not play with her because she is Black.⁵⁴ In this manner, Stella repeats the racial slur towards Black people and even teaches racial biases to the next generation.

Overcoming America’s Binaries by Passing

Like Stella, most citizens of Mallard have internalized colorism. Everyone’s “obsession with lightness” is inscribed in the “civic identity” of Mallard.⁵⁵ At the local barbershop, men argue “about whose wife was fairer.”⁵⁶ According to the narrator, Mallard’s residents “believ[ed] ridiculous things, like drinking coffee or eating chocolate while pregnant might turn a baby dark.”⁵⁷ In this sense, the creation of the fictional town of Mallard “literalizes colorism” because the idea of colorism pervades the village so thoroughly that it becomes immediately “tangible and concrete” for the reader.⁵⁸ Moreover, most citizens reinforce these ideas within the village. After Desiree leaves her abusive husband and returns to Mallard with Jude, Jude is continually discriminated against by both the adults and her peers in the village. Jude’s darker skin tone makes

⁵² *Id.*, 185.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*, 223.

⁵⁵ *Id.*, 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Bennett, interview.

her stand out in Mallard, leading some citizens to make “crude whispers . . . each time [Desiree and Jude] walked around town.”⁵⁹ Later, as an adult, Jude enumerates the degrading names she was called as a child in Mallard: “Tar Baby. Midnight. Darky. Mudpie. Said, Smile, we can’t see you. Said, You so dark you blend into the chalkboard [sic].”⁶⁰ Similarly, Mallard’s citizens pass them over to the next generation, in which they again preserve colorism. Jude’s grandmother, for example, pressures Jude to keep “out of the sun” during the summer and to wear a “big gardening hat” to ensure that her skin does not darken any further.⁶¹ These harmful instructions reaffirm Jude’s racial self-loathing, teaching her that her skin tone does not adhere to Mallard’s ideals. In this context, the colorism of Mallard’s citizens is so thoroughly embedded in their community that they reinscribe the hegemonic structures of white America in their behavior toward other African Americans within their community. This behavior corresponds to Godiwala’s negative form of mimicry.

At the same time, their acts of passing, and the idea behind Mallard as a village, resist and ridicule racial segregation laws. According to Bhabha, mimicry can mock the authority of the colonizer and pose a threat to the “normalized knowledges” of the host culture.⁶² In copying the norms of the colonizing culture, the colonized subject becomes familiar to the colonizer but not quite the same.⁶³ This difference allows the colonized to question the norms of the colonizer and recognize their flaws. As a result, the colonized can destabilize the hegemonic and cultural relations within society.⁶⁴ However, Bhabha points out that mimicry can only destabilize this power if the colonizer is aware that the colonized subject is not quite the same.⁶⁵

This form of mimicry is found in Bennett’s novel. Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator mentions that

⁵⁹ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 73.

⁶⁰ *Id.*, 94.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² “Location of Culture,” 86.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Godiwala, “Postcolonial Desire,” 62.

⁶⁵ “Location of Culture,” 86.

Mallard “was more idea than place.”⁶⁶ The idea behind Mallard mocks the authority of segregation laws. The town’s founder, Alphonse, imagined a place in between the binaries of the segregation laws: “The idea arrived to Alphonse Decuir in 1848, as he stood in the sugarcane fields he’d inherited from the father who’d once owned him . . . A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes [sic]. A third place.”⁶⁷ In creating Mallard, Alphonse resists racial segregation laws, which rest upon the binary of Black versus white. Instead, he creates “a third place” from which its citizens can resist both categories; they neither define themselves as “Negroes [sic],” nor as white.⁶⁸ From this liminal place, citizens undermine the normalized knowledges of the Jim Crow era and pose a threat to the racial hierarchy. For example, many of its citizens regularly pass as white: “Warren Fontenot, riding a train in the white section, . . . Marlena Goudeau becoming white to earn her teaching certificate, [and] . . . Luther Thibodeaux, whose foremen marked him white and gave him more pay.”⁶⁹ By momentarily passing, Mallard’s citizens not only show that race is a social construct but also resist social categorization.

In addition, the novel contrasts this setting, Mallard during the segregation era, with other narrative settings. Although the novel centers on Louisiana in the 1960s, *The Vanishing Half* shifts settings from the early 1960s to the late 1990s and from Louisiana to Los Angeles and New York. Through these shifts, the novel provides snapshots of various American societies. These time and space shifts contrast earlier essentialist notions of identity with the more contemporary notion of identity as a mutable concept. For instance, the novel contrasts Louisiana during the Jim Crow era, a society that is grounded in the binary of black and white, with the multicultural city of New York in the 1990s. The novel’s shifts in time and space suggest the absurdity of racial essentialism.

⁶⁶ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*, 73.

In particular, the novel challenges the essentialist notions of identity through the character of Kennedy, who becomes a professional actress. It is through her character that the novel emphasizes how everyone performs an identity. Of her work as an actress, Kennedy notes that “[t]rue acting meant becoming invisible so that only the character shone through.”⁷⁰ This comment can be taken quite literally. Kennedy, who was raised as “white,” has unconsciously been acting all her life: “Her whole life, in fact, had been a gift of good fortune—she had been given whiteness. Blonde hair, a pretty face, a nice figure, a rich father. She’d sobbed out of speeding tickets, flirted her way to endless second chances. Her whole life, a bounty of gifts she hadn’t deserved.”⁷¹ Despite Kennedy living as white, the one-drop rule of the Jim Crow era—which defined that any amount of African heritage made one African American—would have made her Black.⁷² According to the framing of the novel, which is mostly set in the segregation era, it can be said then that Kennedy has been passing as white because of her Black mother. This example of Kennedy underscores that race is constructed through external signifiers. However, the novel uses Kennedy—an actress—to play with the concept of identity. To be more precise, *The Vanishing Half* creates an analogy between acting, passing, and reality, blurring the lines between these three concepts. If Kennedy has been “passing” all her life, the novel asks readers whether her “white” identity then not has become reality. The novel shows that the act of passing is not simply an act of crossing the border from one category to another but moreover entails a nature of becoming both/and; the analogy between passing and reality shows how passing does multiple things at once. Acts of passing in the novel take place across, over, and between identity categories. In this regard, *The Vanishing Half* defies the notion that identities are discrete, natural, and fixed.

Lastly, Desiree Vignes’ decision not to pass as white challenges the segregation laws and the social hierarchy based on race. When Desiree looks for a job after returning to Mallard, she

⁷⁰ *Id.*, 299.

⁷¹ *Id.*, 336.

⁷² Nerad, *Passing Interest*, 10.

faces racial discrimination. During her interview for a job as a fingerprint examiner at the local Sheriff's Department, the deputy is very impressed by her resume. She had previously examined fingerprints during her ten years of employment at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C. The deputy notices "in amazement" that her print examiner test "might have been a record."⁷³ However, once he "saw [that] her address is listed in Mallard," he dismisses her and says: "No use wasting my time."⁷⁴ The moment he discovers that Desiree is African American, he rejects her for the job. In this passage in the novel, the deputy perceives Desiree as white because she has a light skin tone and previous professional work experience. Although Desiree could have gotten the job by either deliberately passing as white by omitting her address, she decides not to. When the deputy then decides to reject her for her skin color, she accepts the consequences. This example displays how Desiree exerts agency over her own identity, resisting the efforts of others to impose a white identity on her. Simultaneously, it shows how assumed external markers of identity still have social and economic effects. Although Desiree demonstrates that her skin color has nothing to do with her ability to recognize fingerprints, her African heritage is the reason why she has been turned down for the job. This rejection has decisive economic consequences on her life.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Vanishing Half* uses the theme of passing to analyze race and class constructs in the United States, emphasizing the tension inherent in the act of passing. This tension is most visible through the novel's main characters. While Stella challenges assumptions about the visibility of race and class categories, she also strengthens the ideologies of racism and colorism by conforming to white upper-class ideals. Moreover, she has internalized these ideologies and transmits them to her daughter, Kennedy. The examples of Kennedy, Desiree, and Mallard's citizens, however, demonstrate that the act of passing can be a strategy to resist and

⁷³ Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, 47–8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

undermine hegemonic norms. Mallard's citizens perform as white to ridicule racial segregation laws and resist categorization. Their village is an in-between space, which is uncategorizable in terms of the established binaries of the segregation era. At the same time, the citizens preserve the ideals of colorism. Desiree decides not to pass as white, the efforts of others to impose a white identity on her. The novel's nuanced characters depict the difficulties and tensions inherent in the act of passing; characters who pass simultaneously reinscribe and undermine the dominant social construction of race in the United States. Moreover, the novel underscores how passing is not simply crossing the line from one social category to another. Instead, the novel redefines passing as an act which does multiple things at once. In this, the novel challenges essentialist notions of identity, most notably through Kennedy. Through Kennedy, the novel blurs the binaries between passing, acting, and reality, thereby demonstrating that identity categorizations based on visible external signifiers are flawed. In this manner, the multicultural characters are an ideal basis upon which Bennett reimagines what a twenty-first-century passing narrative looks like.

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