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INTERRUPTING THE NARRATIVE: READER EMPATHY AND AUTHORIAL
RESISTANCE IN GAYL JONES'S *CORREGIDORA* AND
BRIT BENNETT'S *THE VANISHING HALF*

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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May 2021

Accepted by:
Dr. Cameron Bushnell, Committee Chair
Dr. Maya Hislop
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a conversation about whether or not narrative theory, and particularly narratology, are fields that are worth pursuing in the modern academy. With narrative theory's intense focus on categories and binaries, it has fallen out of fashion as fields such as feminism and queer studies have begun to grow rapidly and expose the fluidity of these categories. Theorists such as Robyn Warhol and Susan Lanser have strived to find ways that narrative theory can co-exist and even enrich these newer fields of study while simultaneously learning from them. In this essay, I suggest that one of the ways narrative theory can continue to offer contributions to a variety of fields is through the study of narrative form as it relates to narrative empathy in both lyrical and legal subjects. Through close examinations of two novels written by Black women, *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *The Vanishing Half* by Britt Bennett, I hope to show that studying narratives in a formulaic way can still offer insights outside the rigid categories of traditional narratology and that these examinations can help bolster positive representation of marginalized groups in popular narratives.

DEDICATION

To Lily, my constant in the chaos. Her faith in me is eternally unyielding, and without her continual encouragement and love, this manuscript might not exist.

To Eli and Emily, my eternal source of joy and motivation. May you conquer all of life's challenges and never stop pursuing your dreams.

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I would also be remiss to not thank my family who have offered endless support in my return to graduate school and have lent a shoulder to cry on or an ear to listen whenever I needed it.

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INTRODUCTION

Narratives have always served a critical function in society, and while the form and content of those stories might have changed, that primary function has not. Stories help people learn about and cope with the world around them and their own personal experiences. Specifically, literature and storytelling are often devices used in an attempt to understand and unpack traumatic moments. It is no coincidence that Sigmund Freud often used literature as a way to illustrate his theories, especially the ones relating to trauma. As trauma theorist Cathy Caruth states, “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (Caruth 3). However, not all trauma is created equal, and neither is all literature. While traditional narrative theorists might have us believe that some stories are “universal” and can be extrapolated to apply to an array of situations and people, the fact remains that—especially in America—both literary studies and psychoanalytic studies have traditionally revolved around the experiences of middle- and upper-class white men. This not only creates problems in terms of representation, but it also impacts the way audiences approach a text that does not meet these normative criteria. Audience expectations that narratives are meant to be a tool to create understanding and that they can be stand-ins for a multitude of identities and experiences proves harmful when we start talking about narratives written by minority authors.

This paper will specifically focus on two novels written by Black women, and it will strive to examine how these narratives both continue the tradition of linking narratives and trauma while also resisting a type of understanding/universalism that erases the very specific traumas Black women have faced in an American context. These novels, *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *The Vanishing Half* by Britt Bennett, take on very different narrative styles and subject matters, but they each offer an interesting case study in the ways Black female authors elect to represent racial traumas through storytelling. Written nearly a half century apart, these novels both problematize traditional narrative theory as it relates to point-of-view and reader engagement, and they each create a unique resistance to reader understanding. While the very categories of reader and audience are by nature ambiguous, all writers begin their projects with an imagined audience in mind and either consciously or subconsciously make decisions based on that audience's perceived knowledge, values, and experiences (McDowell 34). Even though we cannot be sure who the imagined audience was for Jones or Bennett, the very nature of the fact that they published at major trade presses in the United States means the majority of their readership is white and middle-class, and for the purposes of this examination, the terms reader and audience will refer to that group unless otherwise specified. By examining these novels through the lenses of both traditional narrative theory and Black feminism, we can gain some useful knowledge about the relationship between racial trauma and narrative and utilize that knowledge to help encourage more positive representation in popular narrative. In the vein of examining these novels through a narratological lens, there will be a focus on narrative form as opposed to content. While the plots play a role

in understanding the novels fully, we will find much more useful information in the techniques these authors use to narrate their stories.

In traditional narratives, authors exploit the reader's desire for an emotional connection to the characters in the story, thus creating narrative empathy and reader engagement. Authors like Jones and Bennett, however, foreclose the possibility of that connection through the way they narrate their novels in an effort to stop any universalizing identification that would erase the nuanced aspects of their characters' identities. Narrative empathy is one of narratology's most contested terms, but put simply, it involves "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen 124). By default, this sharing of feeling and perspective establishes an investment in the text and is seen as one of the main elements to prompt a reader to continue reading. While these connections are varied and established in numerous ways, one of the most common and readily talked about ways is through point-of-view and access to a character's inner consciousness. Through establishing that bond, the reader is granted access to the thoughts and emotions of the focal character(s) which makes it easier to become invested. The different types of point-of-view and focalization have been tirelessly catalogued by narrative theorists, and while they are different in their construction and effect, all of them strive to imitate, in varying degrees, real life conversation and connection. Even the most fantastical texts rely on the same basic principles of realistic conversation.

What traditional narrative theory doesn't account for is the idea that some texts, especially racialized texts that are dealing with issues specific to a certain identity group, might want to resist this emotional connection and sense of understanding. Even though Judith Butler never directly uses the term "empathy" in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, she does speak about the harms that can be caused by forcing a subject to "tell in story form the reasons why his or her life has taken the path it has" and that doing so privileges a seamless story above a truth of person that "might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness—in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated to narrative form (64). I disagree with Butler slightly here and suggest that these moments can be found in narrative form, as we will see with Jones and Bennett. While these novels are still written to be consumed, they aren't meant to serve as a shared catharsis, and as Butler notes, they are concerned less with a seamless story than in offering up a type of truthful representation of their characters as a whole. This attention to form and narrative devices is the foundation of what narrative theory can still offer to other fields of study in the modern academy.

It is important here to note that not all women of color authors strive to break this empathetic bond between reader and character. For example, many Black female writers of the 1970s wanted to capitalize on empathetic understanding as a way to form a cohesive group of Black women across many different ethnic and national borders through shared experiences¹ (Kim 154). However, as many theorists interested in

¹ Sue Kim analyzes works by Anita Desai, Buchi Emescheta, Bessie Head, Merle Hodge, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Toni Morrison to illustrate her ideas of empathy-based group creation.

narrative empathy have pointed out, there is a disconnect between empathy toward a lyrical subject (such as the ones illustrated by Kim's analysis of these authors) and empathy and understanding of a legal subject. While there may never be a definitive answer as to whether narratives can directly create real-world change, authors like Bennett and Jones are attempting to break from the establishment of a connection based solely on the lyrical subject in order to put the emphasis on the legal subjects their characters represent. They do this primarily by eliminating the crux of typical narrative empathy—a sense of personal connection to the main character(s).

For purposes of this examination, I will be using the definition of aesthetic empathy offered by Keen in "Intersectional Narratology in the Study of Empathy." Keen, elaborating on psychologist C. Daniel Batson's theories of empathy, describes aesthetic empathy as a fusion of subject and object (130). This conflation has a tendency to erase the subject of the text and replace any differences between them and the reader with only the shared feelings of hurt/loss/joy/etc. It is this very concept of erasure that authors like Jones and Bennett are actively working to counter. Instead of allowing their readers to experience the emotions of their characters in moments of high drama throughout the text, Bennett and Jones work to keep the reader on the outside of those moments as a way to asserting that the reader is unable to fully know or understand the characters' feelings and experiences. One of the only ways this resistance has been discussed in narrative theory is through slave narratives, and Robyn Warhol's work on the subject disrupts much of the standing scholarship on point-of-view. In "'Reader, Can You Imagine? No, You Cannot': The Narratee as Other in Harriet Jacobs's Text," Warhol asserts that in

slave narratives the logic becomes “because you have not seen/done/lived what I have, you *cannot* feel the same way I feel” (65). While not traditional slave narratives, this same concept of resistance shows itself in both *Corregidora* and *The Vanishing Half* through the form of the texts and the authors’ choice of narrative techniques.

ALIENATION AND NARRATIVE DISTANCE IN *CORREGIDORA*

Much debate has been had by scholars about how to classify Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*—and answers range from a blues novel to a queer text. Regardless of how it is classified, *Corregidora* begins to problematize our traditional concepts of narrative from the first page. Our narrator, who isn’t identified with a name for several pages, opens the story talking about her marriage to her husband, Mutt, and the marital problems that stem from her desire to continue singing at a local bar. There is an instant familiarity between the narrator and the reader—though that doesn’t last for long—as if Ursa is retelling the story to a friend who is already partially aware of her life. This sense of kinship between reader and narrator is not an uncommon phenomenon in narratives, and for those who want to identify *Corregidora* as a quasi-slave narrative, this type of audience address is further proof. While Ursa never directly references the reader through the use of second person pronouns, the awareness of the fact that she is narrating this story to someone else qualifies this narration as “engaging,” to use Warhol’s terminology. Warhol sets up a binary between a feminine engaging narrator—who uses direct address to enforce realism and encourage emotional engagement between the reader and the

narrative action—and a masculine distancing narrator who addresses a fictive narratee as a way to subvert realism and draw attention to the actual construction of the text (Warhol 59). This binary is already an overly simplistic explanation for the very complex concepts of point-of-view and narration, and any analysis of Jones's text will quickly show how she uproots this dualistic system of categorization.

While Jones does write from an intimate first-person point-of-view that can create a type of emotional connection, she equally subverts realism and calls attention to the construction of her novel. While the opening offers a sense of intimacy between the reader and narrator, that closeness is shattered by the end of the first page. After offering a personal telling to the reader about her relationship and marriage to Mutt, Ursa begins to recount the incident that leads to most of the dramatic tension throughout the novel: Mutt's physical abuse that ends with her miscarriage and hysterectomy. This moment, which consumes Ursa for the next 170 pages, is nothing more than a blip in Ursa's first recounting. The narration moves quickly from an argument between Ursa and Mutt over her singing to Ursa's narration saying, "That was when I fell. The doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out. Mutt and me didn't stay together after that" (Jones 1). While certainly implied, Ursa doesn't even directly state that Mutt pushed her down the stairs until much later in the chapter, and neither the reader nor Mutt initially know that Ursa was pregnant when she fell.

After an opening paragraph that welcomes the reader into Ursa's life without any barriers, Jones quickly slams the door shut and places the reader in the position of the detective who will always be one step behind; they must piece together what happened

while keeping up with the plot as it continues to churn forward. Not only that, but Jones intentionally alienates a large portion of her middle-class readership through the very vocabulary and diction she chose to utilize in the novel. The language is intensely graphic; Ursa and the other characters use profanity quite regularly, and Jones does not gloss over any of the moments of trauma experienced by Ursa or her family; she retells these scenes vividly and nonchalantly. Any casual readers would likely be turned away by the harsh language and intense scenes of sexual violence.

This alienation continues in a few different ways, but most notably through the imagined internal conversations Ursa has with various characters throughout the novel. These passages do a lot of work in the text, but they primarily introduce a bit of surrealism into the writing. Within the form of the novel, all of these moments appear as largely italicized passages separated from the rest of the text by section breaks. To make things more confusing, Jones mingles these imagined conversations in with some flashbacks of Ursa's own memories as well as sequences that read more like dreams. There is rarely any introductory material leading up to them to help orient the reader about when and where they are. These conversations, lingering somewhere between dream, flashback, and imagination, put up a barrier between Ursa's inner consciousness and the reader.

While the traditional engaging narrator would use a combination of the reader and other characters as her sounding board to work through the physical and psychological injuries she has suffered, Ursa instead uses her own subconscious, excluding the reader from assisting in her healing process. However, to further complicate narrative

connection, Ursa isn't simply having these interior conversations with herself, which would allow the reader more access to her emotions and thoughts and begin forming that empathetic bond that they crave. Instead, Ursa needs a mediator within her own consciousness to help her process her trauma, and she uses these imagined conversations, mostly between her and Mutt, as the catalyst for that healing. In the essay "Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," Stephanie Li quotes psychoanalyst Dori Laub as saying, "the process whereby survival takes place through the creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness, who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life" (Laub, qtd. in Li 142). Ursa's need for this dual consciousness not only serves as a valid mechanism for coping with trauma, but it is also a convenient narrative tool whereby Jones can exclude the reader from Ursa's healing. While Mutt is not actually in the room, Ursa needs to process her feelings through a third party, and Jones resists using the reader as that mediator.

In the first of these scenes, which takes place after Ursa's first sexual encounter with Tadpole after her surgery, she imagines a conversation with Mutt in which she talks about being pregnant when she fell: "*Mutt, just suppose something was in there when they took it out. What would you feel then?*" (Jones 52). Still early on in her healing, Ursa cannot even bring herself to say that she was pregnant and instead speaks in hypotheticals. While the reader can infer that what she is saying is true and the imagined Mutt doesn't seem to believe the assertion, the fact that this is how the information is revealed to the audience continues to push away any sense of trust or emotional connection between Ursa and the reader. She also doesn't tell Mutt or the reader how she

feels about the situation, but rather asks him how he feels, as if she needs a guide on how she should be feeling herself. As a result, the narration isn't meant to be understood as just Ursa's unfiltered thoughts as would be the case with many traditional narratives using first-person narration, but rather a mediated and crafted interior dialogue meant to resemble a conversation Ursa would have with the listener. Once again, the reader is excluded from being an active participant in Ursa's coping and is instead relegated to the sidelines where all they can do is play the role of the voyeur eavesdropping on these interior dialogues.

Linearly, the first of these surreal passages is one of Ursa's memories of Great Gram telling her about the atrocities suffered at the hand of Corregidora, and it illustrates another way Jones is isolating her main character from the reader's empathetic gaze. This flashback is simply slipped into the narrative after a conversation between Ursa and Tadpole, and not only does it take a few sentences for the reader to even establish what this passage is, the actual composition of the paragraphs makes it even more difficult to parse. There is a mix of exposition, dialogue, and description, and there are moments where it is unclear who is speaking. The passage opens in a third-person voice, and it is unclear whether it is still Ursa speaking or if another narrator has taken over for the time being. The fact that these passages are italicized and separated from the main text are visual signals that these moments are different in some ways. The reader cannot know what to expect entering the first one because it is a break in the prescribed form and narration. The narrator begins with a description of Corregidora, the Portuguese plantation owner who held Ursa's Great Gram and Gram in captivity, and how "he took

Great Gram out of the field when she was still a child and put her to work in his
whorehouse” (Jones 8). The reader doesn’t know who she is referring to until the end
of the paragraph, and even when her name (Dorita) is revealed, it is unclear of what
connection she has to Ursa or the story. It isn’t until the next paragraph that Ursa’s voice
returns in its first-person iteration and introduces Dorita as her Great Gram. Almost as
soon as the reader has gotten their bearings in understanding this is Ursa telling the story
of her Great Gram, the voice switches again to a dialogue of Great Gram speaking to
Ursa as opposed to Ursa speaking to the reader. While the flashback does provide a good
amount of detail about Great Gram’s experiences, it is still a closed off personal moment
between her and Ursa that casts the reader to the sidelines to watch.

The first several passages like the one above can be read as one continuous story
interrupted by the main narrative of Ursa’s story; Ursa is simultaneously living her own
trauma and reliving, through the memories of her Great Gram, Gram, and Mama, the
ancestral trauma inflicted upon her family by Corregidora. However, this simultaneous
experiencing is not equal, and as Sirene Harb points out, “[Great Gram’s] tales presented
‘absolute’ versions of the past, characterized by evil and intense victimization. With its
polarization of past and present and its lack of ambivalence and paradoxes, the ancestral
narrative does not leave any space for Ursa to explore her personal story” (120). At this
early state of the narrative, Ursa can only process her own trauma in relation to that of the
ancestral story that has been passed down to her by her family’s matriarchs. While within
the content of the narrative this might simply be a plot point that serves as a catalyst for
Ursa’s self-exploration, this tension does something different in the form of the novel. By

the time this passage arrives, Jones has already slammed a door between Ursa and the reader, but these flashbacks to Great Gram's story serve to further push the reader away from Ursa to the point of wondering whose story this novel is actually going to be telling.

Foregrounding these moments of trauma related to the slave past, Jones interrupts not only Ursa's pleasure and healing, but also that of the reader who is forced to confront the atrocities of slavery instead of simply being entertained by a narrative disconnected from that past (Setka 136). Going back to Butler's claim about fictional narratives prioritizing a seamless plot, we can see here that Jones has no interest in telling a traditional story. Her novel is full of interruptions and stoppages that work to help Ursa tell her truth, but not necessarily to the reader. Ursa's narration more closely resembles what Butler sees in real life narration as opposed to that of fictional characters, and that is once again an example of Jones attempting to move past the lyrical subject to that of the legal one. In addition, Jones's constant retelling of this personal family trauma within the context of the novel obstructs the intimacy that these narratives would usually create which means that the reader doesn't learn anything new about Ursa through these snippets of the story. These passages do become less frequent later in the text, and there are a couple different ways to view that. First, as a plot point, the lessening of the flashbacks shows Ursa's ability to disentangle her own story from the ancestral narrative and begin living/telling her own story. However, from a structural standpoint, by this point in the novel Jones has well established the barriers between Ursa and the reader, so the flashbacks are no longer a necessary tool to maintain that distance. The distance is

already irreparable, and anyone still reading by this point has come to terms with that narrative distance.

JONES'S REDEFINING OF EMPATHY

I'd like to move for a moment to a point in the text that might seem to undercut Jones's desire of resisting empathy. A few scholars writing about *Corregidora* have theorized that Ursa's singing is a way for her to connect with the audience and tell her own story free of the weight of the ancestral narrative (Setka 137-139). While I agree that Ursa's voice becomes her way to cope within the plot of the narrative, the form of the novel still forecloses any real emotional connection between Ursa and the reader. The moments she is singing are certainly the places where we get the most unfiltered access to her consciousness, but Jones is still careful to construct this in a way that maintains uncertainty. First, these moments complicate the idea of audience within the novel. Ursa now has two audiences: the readers of the novel and the listeners in the club. It might seem compelling to conflate these two audiences and slip the readers into the seats in the club, watching Ursa perform on stage, but several factors inhibit this conflation. Most importantly, the readers of the novels cannot hear Ursa sing; the very medium of the text prohibits it. Jones does provide a few lyrics within the text, but the reader still cannot *hear* Ursa's voice, and it is the act of hearing that leads other characters to believe they have glimpsed something of Ursa's emotional state. Both Cat and Max make comments about how Ursa's voice changed after her surgery, but neither of them can name exactly

what that change is, only that it seems to represent the hurt inside her. The very fact that these characters cannot put into words how Ursa's voice has changed keeps this insight hidden from the readers; it exists solely in the abstract world of sound that they cannot access which maintains the narrative distance even in Ursa's most emotionally open moments in the text.

Jones's novel was published at the heart of the period Sue Kim explores in her study of women of color authors trying to use narrative empathy as a tool to form an international coalition of women sharing similar struggles. Despite this push happening around her, Jones still actively worked against the notion that empathy is the key to creating any real-world changes. Kim even notes in her analysis that "*Corregidora's* protagonist Ursa resists the empathy of a typical middle-class reader; the violent sexuality of the history that produces her is so foregrounded that the novel is often described as 'brutal'" (Kim 162). This brutality serves two purposes for Jones. First, the graphic language, sexual violence, and lack of emotional connection serve as ways to turn away readers who are uninterested in truly learning anything from the novel. If their goal is simply an enjoyable read, Jones makes it clear this is not the book for them. Secondly and relatedly, those same factors ensure that any reader who does push through the novel is more likely to walk away altered by the text. While they cannot understand Ursa, they begin to understand their lack of understanding; and Jones seems to be suggesting that acceptance of not being able to comprehend and know is the key to affecting social change. Readers shouldn't want to combat racial injustice because they feel that they have, for a moment, inhabited the space of a fictional Black women and are outraged.

They should want to fight because they don't want anyone to inhabit those harmful and prejudiced places. This is the beginning of the move from lyrical empathy to legal empathy, and that step is necessary if narrative is ever going to have an impact beyond the pages of a book.

DISTANCE AND APATHY IN BENNETT'S MODERN PASSING NOVEL

Published in 2020, Britt Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* at first glance doesn't seem to have much in common with Jones's *Corregidora*. Whereas Jones writes in first-person through Ursa's consciousness, Bennett's novel is narrated in a third-person omniscient voice and tells the stories of multiple characters as opposed to just one. However, despite their seemingly different approaches and subject matters, the two novels have more in common than it seems. Primarily, they both deal, in diverse ways, with family traumas that are the result of the history of the enslavement of Black people in America. This trauma is not only inscribed in the plots of these novels (dealing with death, discovering family secrets, experiencing a miscarriage, etc.), but is also foregrounded in the very construction of the narratives. For Bennett, like Jones, this includes having main characters who are light-skinned, and neither author is afraid of confronting the history of rape and sexual violence against enslaved women in the establishment of their characters' histories.

Once more, we find a lyrical subject trying to move beyond the boundaries of the page and into the realm of the legal subject. Both Bennett and Jones are actively trying to

move into the sociological and are pushing back on the idea that novels are meant to be an art form that is consumed by the reader. Some might question why these authors, or others, would care about this shift or what the major point of difference is between these forms of empathy. To answer this, I return to Kim who writes:

The individual's readerly empathy may be real, and a reader may experience genuine emotion at the sufferings of a protagonist in very different circumstances. But if that empathy remains at the level of lyric subject, at the expense of the legal subject or certain varieties of legal subjectivity [...] then the readerly empathy not only fails to bridge differences but also participates in licensing and exacerbating the hierarchical, exploitative legal, economic, and political systems that produce those differences. (Kim 162)

Even though Bennett's narration style differs dramatically from Jones's in *Corregidora*, it serves a similar purpose in excluding the readers from any sense of understanding or identification while also in a way protecting her characters from the audience's prying eyes during their most vulnerable moments in order to prevent the type of lyrical empathy Kim warns against in her essay.

Bennett's novel, a modern passing story, follows the story of twins Desiree and Stella, light-skinned girls from a town that prides itself on each generation being lighter than the last, and their respective lives after running away from Mallard as teenagers. Desiree marries a dark-skinned man, gives birth to a dark-skinned daughter, and returns to Mallard to escape her abusive husband while Stella passes as white, has a white family, and lives in a white suburban neighborhood. Each of the twins suffer a number of

traumatic life events throughout the narrative, including witnessing their father's grisly murder at the hands of a white mob. While most narratives would traffic in that trauma, lingering in those moments and wringing them for dramatic tension and to elicit an emotional response from the reader, Bennett's narrator glosses over most of these moments, not allowing the reader to get a clear look into the characters' interior thinking or emotions. This distance, created through a combination of an omniscient third person narration and lack of access to characters' consciousness, resists the idea that a perceived white audience can know or understand Desiree and Stella's pain. Rather than allowing the reader to identify with them through an emotional connection, Bennett forces the reader to watch from the sidelines and contemplate their own participation/complicity in the violence and trauma illustrated in the narrative.

Bennett's novel joins a long tradition of passing novels, and it is critical to understand that tradition to fully appreciate how Bennett deviates from the normal tropes of the genre. While not the first or only one to subvert these tropes, Bennett's subversion plays into her larger narrative construction of resisting reader identification. Passing novels really date back to early slave narratives where light-skinned slaves were able to escape by passing as white (Godfrey and Young 15-16). After these earliest examples, some of the most famous passing novels were written in the 20s and 30s with Nella Larson's *Passing* and Frannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. Both of these novels employ the trope of the tragic mulatto; a light-skinned woman who will ultimately die tragically, often by her own hand. This is typically written as a punishment for their attempt at

passing as white, and the characters are usually depicted as being stuck between whiteness and Blackness, not fully accepted by either.

Bennett's passing character, Stella, breaks from this tradition in a few very important ways. Perhaps most importantly, Stella doesn't die at the end of the book, and she remains in her life as a white woman. The only real difference at the end of the novel is that her daughter, Kennedy, is now aware of the truth, but in many ways that actually alleviates some of the tension between the mother and daughter. Stella no longer has to lie to her daughter, and even though Kennedy's perception of the world was completely changed by this revelation, her spin out is presented as little more than teenage melodrama. Stella, like some of the others in the genre before her, is certainly caught between her two lives, but she has no real reservations about her decision to leave her family and pass. Her main concern is her new family finding out the truth and the fallout that would occur as a result. Bennett could have easily written Stella's character to fit more neatly in the tragic mulatto, but instead of centering Stella's entire character around concerns of identity, Bennett deepens the character by giving her other plotlines that explore her personality more deeply, such as her relationships with her neighbor Loretta and her daughter. Bennett does not center her novel on tragedy, and rather than leaning into tropes that would cause the reader to believe they know and understand Stella's character, Bennett breaks out of the prescribed character type in order to keep readers guessing how Stella's story will end.

Returning for a moment to Warhol's description of engaging vs. distancing narrators, her definitions once more don't quite tack with Bennett's narrative style. While

the novel creates a narrative distance that would place it in the “masculine distancing” category and away from the “engaging” narratives that want to promote change in the reader and beyond, *The Vanishing Half* wants the readers to walk away from the text and do/believe something that can affect change in the real world; however, Bennett resists creating that solely on the basis of empathy/understanding. Bennett achieves this through adopting a type of a-pathetic narration where there are very limited moments in the text that linger in trauma or drama for the sake of eliciting a reaction from the reader. While this on its own doesn’t preclude the reader from sympathizing with the characters, it does suggest that Bennett is not overly concerned with this connection. This primarily stems from the social moment Bennett is writing in. Unlike some of her predecessors who had to fight simply to claim Black women’s humanity and ability to feel pain, Bennett, in 2020, is taking a step back to force a perceived white audience to see the afterlife of slavery and Jim Crow era segregation on the lives of her characters that fundamentally stops them from being able to understand their traumas. This is a deviation from both the authors Kim explores in her analysis and even, to a lesser extent, Jones. One of the main reasons Jones highlights the graphic nature of Ursa’s ancestral story is to continue foregrounding the fact that these women are capable of experiencing intense pain. While Jones still shoves the audience away from these moments, they exist much more vividly in *Corregidora* than in *The Vanishing Half*. Even if Bennett wasn’t writing to an explicitly white audience, the very fact that the novel was published at a trade press in America means that it will have a large, if not dominant, white readership. For the non-white readers, Bennett’s narration might not present the same obstacle, and they may find

themselves more easily able to slip into her characters consciousnesses despite the distance created by the actual prose.

Stepping back chronologically in the novel, the first tragic event that occurs in the lives of the Vignes twins was witnessing their father's attack. Their father, Leon, was also light-skinned, but as Bennett's narrator points out, that wasn't enough to save him from the anger of some local white men when his business became too successful. Once again, Bennett takes a moment that could have been drawn out and littered with strong emotion and condenses it to a handful of lines that provide only a very base summary.

The description of Leon's attack reads:

Four Vignes boys, all dead by thirty. The eldest collapsed in a chain gang from heatstroke; the second gassed in a Belgian trench; the third stabbed in a bar fight; and the youngest, Leon Vignes, lynched twice, the first time at home while his twin girls watched through a crack in the closet door, hands clamped over each other's mouths until their palms misted with spit. (Bennett 33)

It goes on to describe his attack in a very detached, almost clinical language. Even adding in that description, the entire event takes place over less than a page before turning to the description of Desiree and Stella in the closet. Rather than entering their consciousnesses or detailing their emotions in the moments they watched their father's beating, that scene focuses on Desiree's surprise of not knowing how Stella was going to react. Instead of being about their father's murder, Bennett keeps the attention on the sisters' relationship and how this moment fundamentally changed their dynamic because Desiree realized she did not know what Stella was thinking. That is, the plot reproduces the distancing

performed by the narrative style. In this scene, Bennett is imitating more of what Warhol dubs the “masculine distancing” narrator, however she cannot be completely detached from the “feminine engaged narrator” for the simple fact that her novel is attempting to maintain a type of realism and encourage realization and/or action in her readers.

APATHETIC NARRATION OF TRAUMA IN *THE VANISHING HALF*

The main thing Warhol’s description of feminine versus masculine narrator doesn’t take into account is race, which is central to this conversation about Bennett and *The Vanishing Half*. Warhol even acknowledges that her project on Harriet Jacobs is an attempt to remedy a previous analysis of hers that relied entirely on works by white middle-class women, but as she insists in this article, a binary analytical tool can still be helpful even if the texts being examined don’t fit neatly into either category. With Bennett, it is useful to see where she deviates from these traditional narrative elements and for what purpose. Part of that purpose might be a new way of representing trauma in narrative. Hillary Chute offers an interesting perspective on narrative representation of trauma in the introduction to her book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. As the title suggests, Chute focuses on graphic novels and comics as opposed to traditional novels, but much of her work can still apply to *The Vanishing Half*.

For example, Chute talks about how graphic novels, at least the ones she examines in her book, have the unique issue of having the author *in* the story (3). This

occurs not only through the autobiographical nature of some of these comics, but also in the fact that their handwriting and illustrations are the very things delivering the story to the reader. Bennett does not appear in her novel as a character or through her own handwriting, but as with most Black female authors, she is still perceived to be in her novel by a large majority of readers. There is a prevalent line of thought that many readers subscribe to in which Black women writing about Black women becomes inherently autobiographical, at least in certain respects. There is a desire to map the author onto the main character(s) that doesn't exist in texts written by non-Black authors (McDowell 71-73). This conflation is amplified in stories where race is a central issue in the plot, as with *The Vanishing Half*. Chute also theorizes that graphic novels offer a more ethical representation of trauma because unlike other mediums, such as film, the reader has control over how long they look at the panels that depict traumatic moments (Chute 9). While Bennett's novel doesn't have panels, she does have a similar ethos in not lingering in traumatic moments. Unlike Jones who uses these moments to make the readers uncomfortable, Bennett shifts the focus away from the trauma entirely. While the power is still with the author rather than the reader, the very fact that Bennett's novel can be read in two different ways—one that really examines these traumatic moments and the history of racism that led to them and one that allows the reader to take the plot at face value without that examination—still empowers the reader in a way that is different from other novels. If anything, she could be accused of what Chute suggests is a too casual approach to trauma, but that doesn't quite fit either. Even though *The Vanishing Half* doesn't expound on these moments, it also doesn't undermine their significance in the

lives of its characters; it rather tries to protect the characters from the readers' intrusive eyes.

A prime example of that protection occurs when Stella and Desiree are teenagers cleaning a white couple's house to help their mother with the bills. Thinking back on her life before passing and marrying her husband, Blake, Stella recounts her sexual assault at the hands of Mr. Dupont, the owner of the house she and Desiree cleaned. Much like the description of their father's vicious attack, this scene also only lasts a handful of lines. It reads:

Picking up after those bratty boys and dodging Mr. Dupont, who followed her into the pantry, shut the door, and stuck his hand up her dress. Three times he'd touched her and himself too, panting, his breath thick with brandy, while she tried to get away, but the pantry was too small and he was too strong, pressing her against the shelves. Then it was over, as quick as it started. (Bennett 154)

Not only does this not take up a lot of narrative space, the assault is put on the same level—literally in the sentence and also in the diction—with Stella's annoyance at having to pick up after the Dupont's children. While it is possible Stella's character is simply trying to repress this memory, the fact that Bennett uses a third person narrator to deliver these moments makes it a purposeful choice on the part of the author to narratively minimize these moments. Once again, this trauma is bound up in concepts of race. While sexual assault is not confined along racial categories, Mr. Dupont's assault on Stella was certainly racially motivated. Not only did he see her as inferior and probably hyper-sexual as Black women are often seen, he also knew he would never face any

consequences. As Stella says in reference to her and Loretta's relationship later in the book, Mr. Dupont knew that at the end of the day, his word was worth more than Stella's, so even if she told someone what happened, no one would believe her or care. Rather than racial tensions being an afterthought in the narration, Bennett brings it to life through the very act of narration, making the reader either leave the scene at face value without that emotional connection or wade through her narrative devices in order to unpack it and become more aware of their role in the dynamics at play.

On the other side of the novel, Desiree also experiences her fair share of trauma, another way in which Bennett is trying to break from the traditional passing novel. It isn't only Stella—the embodiment of the tragic mulatto trope—who experiences tragedy. Desiree, who was abandoned by Stella after they ran away from home together, marries a dark-skinned man and gives birth to a dark-skinned daughter. Her husband, Sam, has a temper and eventually turns violent, beating Desiree after she implies she doesn't want to have another child with him. As the narrator is recounting the scene that prompts Desiree leaving Sam, it doesn't focus on Sam's actions as much as it does Desiree's thought process. The narrator, focalized through Desiree, says "when he'd grabbed her throat, she knew exactly why. She'd wounded him while he was still grieving, and he'd gotten angry. So he liked to throw his weight around a little. Who could blame him, living in a world that refused to respect him as a man?" (26). Desiree makes a social justification for her inner trauma as a way to explore the factors that have led to this moment in Sam's life while also still blocking off her inner consciousness from the reader. It is no coincidence

that Bennett chose to set this scene after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and in the middle of the unrest that followed.

Once again, Bennett is centering racial issues that color these traumatic moments in ways that make them unique from similar traumas experienced by non-Black people. The narrator/Desiree even attempts to excuse some of Sam's actions by implying that he is lashing out as a way to exert power over Desiree in the same way white people hold power over him in his everyday life. While Desiree still leaves Sam, she seems to understand his need for power and control. This combination of historical context, projection of violence, and brief narration puts a wall between the reader and characters. Typically, in a narrative of an abused woman, the writer would spend pages detailing not only the abuse itself, but the woman's inner thoughts as she wrestles with whether or not to leave the situation. Instead, Bennett doesn't even add in this narration until Desiree is safely back in Mallard with her mother. This forces the reader to see past Desiree's abuse and allows Bennett to deepen the character. While her abusive relationship with Sam certainly continues to impact her life after she leaves, her entire story is not centered around her abuse.

Bennett, like Harriet Jacobs in Warhol's analysis, blends elements of the feminine engaging and masculine distancing narrators, and also like Jacobs, she most closely aligns with the engaging narrator in one key area: the desire to promote real thought/change in her readers. Writing about Jacobs, Warhol says, "The interventions invite the actual reader to become conscious of her own activity in reading, and to consider whether she can take action in the extratextual world to redress the wrongs she

has been reading about” (66). While Jacobs was writing directly to an abolitionist audience, Bennett is attempting to achieve a similar goal. Published in 2020, *The Vanishing Half* was released at a moment when the Black Lives Matter movement was gaining national attention at an unprecedented scale. While Bennett couldn’t have known the exact political moment in which her book would be published, she was writing it in an equally turbulent moment, and it is no mistake that her novel addresses some of the racial issues that are still so prevalent in modern America. However, she doesn’t follow the rest of the engaging narrator script, instead opting to narrate her otherwise emotionally turbulent novel in a distanced, third person, a-pathetic tone in order to prioritize her character’s struggles based on their race rather than as openly understood moments between them and the reader. Likewise, Bennett chooses to narrate these traumatic moments from the narrative future with the characters recalling the traumas as a way to force the reader to move past what happened to them and see them as whole “people” outside of their circumstances. The very nature of Bennett’s popularity and this novel’s widespread acclaim might seem to undermine the idea that her novel is working to resist and subvert audience expectations. However, as Kim points out in her essay, this is an example of the commodification and commercialization of multiculturalism. Reading multicultural novels has become a type of “cultural capital for the middlebrow and/or educated cosmopolitan reader” (161). The widespread acclaim and multiple awards Bennett has received does not undermine the important work her narrative is doing; it is a symptom of a greater problem of consumerism. While this might seem like a difficult balance to maintain, Bennett is able to achieve it rather easily with her unique

narrative style that prioritizes history and race while also keeping her audience at arm's length from her characters' consciousnesses.

INTERRUPTIONS IN NARRATIVE FORM

In both *Corregidora* and *The Vanishing Half* the moments that most readily show the authors' resistance to narrative empathy are the ones that have the most narrative potential for drama and the ones that deal with tragedies and traumas in the characters' lives. Most authors would lean into these scenes and bring the readers along for the emotional impact that they bring not only out of an instinctive desire to elicit empathy, but because we have often been told that these are the scenes that make for good storytelling. In much the same way that moviegoers lean forward in anticipation during car chase scenes, readers look forward to reading pages of intense drama. Bennett and Jones instead want their readers to lean into other methods of characterization, which is why the scenes examined in this paper also share another common narrative technique: narrating from a temporal distance. Both novels are already narrated in past tense, but in the scenes where the characters are experiencing extreme emotions and the authors want to maintain distance in the face of content that would otherwise connect the reader to the characters, they decide to disconnect the scenes from the surrounding ones temporally.

The temporal distance is more obvious in *Corregidora* where the italicized flashbacks are formally set apart from the rest of the text, but even in the moments after her miscarriage, Ursa narrates them between moments in the narrative present where she

is with Tadpole in his apartment. In *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett narrates the murder of the twins' father, Stella's assault, and Desiree's abuse between moments in the narrative present where the characters are not actually in the middle of those experiences. Desiree thinks about Sam's abuse after she is already on the train leaving him, Stella recalls her assault while in bed with Blake, and the narrator recounts Leon's murder after the girls are already grown up and out of Mallard. This removes the urgency that would normally be felt in these scenes, even in novels narrated in the past tense, because they read more like memories/flashbacks than action sequences. Both authors reserve the narrative present for moments of character and relationship building rather than emotionally traumatic scenes. Returning to Butler, each of these scenes is a point of interruption or stoppage that breaks up the seamless narrative of the plot. What this shows is that, while Butler's assumption might be correct about many novels, it is certainly not a universal truth, and an attention to narrative form and the way authors strive to offer up these points of interruption and stoppage in pursuit of a more truthful narrative is critical in a move from lyrical to legal empathy.

CONCLUSION

There have been many conversations over the past decade about whether or not narrative theory is a field worth continuing to study and what it would have to offer to the rest of the academic world, specifically in the realms of feminist and queer studies. While these fields offer new ways to examine literary texts, is the reverse also true? Hopefully

these analyses offer some insight into how that might be true in a revamped narratology. Paying attention to how authors choose to form their character subjects and plots around ideas of identity and empathy can help us gain insight into if/how narratives can be used to affect positive social change. While that might seem a large and unrealistic goal in terms of widespread changes related to inequality, these changes can start at a much smaller level that has a significance we shouldn't overlook such as producing a wider range of characters in popular narrative. Great strides have already been made in this regard over the years, but as many critics have been quick to point out, these characters tend to be more tokenistic than representative of real change in thought, and this is largely because writers are still trying to portray these diverse characters in ways that are palpable to their largely white audiences. This includes stripping away any personality traits that might be seen as undesirable and fitting them into plots that are easily recognizable (meaning not unique to any of these diverse identities) and attempting to make them relatable and worthy of empathy.

Authors like Jones and Bennett, whether it was their intention or not, are doing important work that insists there isn't a need for understanding or empathy from the audience and that marginalized characters can exist in their own spaces. In this way, an understanding of narrative form, characterization, and narration are important tools for measuring the level of change in positive representation. If that is the case, then narrative theory still has something to offer to a multitude of fields, and as Warhol asserts in the introduction of *Narrative Theory Unbound*, these interdisciplinary studies of narrative are a rich source of scholarship that is still relatively untapped (4). Studies in narrative

empathy are a particularly rich field that will hopefully continue to lead to an exploration of the ways in which a lyrical subject can begin to be understood as a legal subject and what might be possible when that shift is fully realized.

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