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The Unarticulated Unseen: Britt Bennett's "The Vanishing Half" and Her Intent on Revealing the Unseen in the Tradition of Racial Passing

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THE UNARTICULATED UNSEEN: BRITT BENNETT'S "THE VANISHING
HALF" AND HER INTENT ON REVEALING THE UNSEEN IN THE
TRADITION OF RACIAL PASSING

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Caroline Maas Rue
May 2022

Accepted by:
Dr. Cameron Bushnell
Dr. Maria Bose
Dr. Maya Hislop

ABSTRACT

Throughout the trajectory of passing literature, there have been varying projections of racial identity as it is intertwined with choice and power. Despite the many commonalities between the archetypal passing novel, the differences in the way that passing is demarcated in various novels is indicative of the racial climate out of which it came. This paper considers Britt Bennett's 2020 novel, *The Vanishing Half*, as a socio-political artifact of an allegedly post-racial era. In considering Bennett's novel as a reflection of post-raciality, a comparative study incorporating Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Douglas Sirk's Adaptation of *Imitation of Life*, and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*, conclude that, though the characteristics of racial passing might appear different across the 20th and 21st centuries, racial passing is still a privilege-incentivized act which necessitates the passer exhibit agency as much as it does abandonment of the Self. In this paper, Bennett's character, Stella Sanders, is analyzed in terms of her desire and resulting attainment of a life in which she passes as white, and what this desire denotes about a society in which the benefits of being white surpass the pain of sacrificing her own blackness. I argue that, although the "opportunity" to pass is initially presented to Stella as a presumption of racial identity on behalf of white people, Bennett writes Stella's passing as walking a grey line between an identity that she chooses for herself and an identity that is assigned, making the act itself far-more complicated than many of Bennett's predecessors have been able to articulate.

DEDICATION

To my grandfather, Professor Randy Rankin, whose birthday cards and letters from Santa were always written with careful literary prowess, whose language I have mimicked,

deconstructed, and studied since before I could read:

You have been my very greatest English teacher.

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My biggest love to my biggest fans (parents), Dave and Mel Maas: thank you for teaching me what it is to be a woman who asks questions, and for helping me burden the answers when they are heavy.

Equally big love to my sister, Laura, whose lightness has saved me more times than I can count.

Finally, I'd like to thank Zachary, whose words of belief in me have imbued the words on these pages.

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INTRODUCTION

Racial passing, or the ability of an individual who classifies as one race to be socially believed to be another, comes to modernity with a long, multi-faceted history of oppression and necessity. Racial passing also exists with a simultaneous claiming of agency alongside a loss of identity. Rising from its genesis within slaves passing as white in order to escape to freedom, the American passing narrative has historically been a series of tales regarding power and attaining it by way of racial identity. Despite this long literary history of passing literature, the popularity of the phenomenon has decreased as society has ushered in a post-racial ideology. Britt Bennett's novel, "The Vanishing Half" pushes back against the notion that passing no longer has a place in the 21st century conversation regarding power, race, and general identity. From the 1920s to the 2020s, the allure of passing for white continues. Where Deborah McDowell so eloquently phrases an explicit possibility, "What happens when the sign of the body is recognized as white and is thus free of the barriers to opportunity that "race" imposes?" (McDowell 65), Bennett is focused on the implicit aspects of passing. I argue that, although the "opportunity" to pass is initially presented to Stella as a presumption of racial identity on behalf of white people, Bennett writes Stella's passing as walking a grey line between an identity that she chooses for herself and an identity that is assigned. For Bennett, passing must include both a white buy-in of the passer's identity, as well as the passer's acting on having been mistaken as white, making the act itself far-more complicated than many of Bennett's predecessors have been able to articulate.

The central question driving this piece of writing forward is, "What is to be made of an allegedly post-racial society in which books like Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* are still wildly popular?" To adequately explore this question, I have found it necessary to track the historical trajectory of the passing novel, as the implicit and explicit codes of alleged racial representation

that our society still values so deeply have been practiced in performance and interpretation for decades. It is through the exploration of these novels that I have been able to read Bennett's novel and its particular import to today's presumably post-racial society more clearly.

Passing has long-been an issue of visibility in previous passing novels, but Bennett makes visible the intangible aspects of Passing. White assumptions of racial identity, the existence of the black "essential self," and the possibility of a color line that contains a range of skin color shades are just a few among many issues that Bennett's novel explores. However, the ever-malleable concept of identity follows Stella Sanders around like a shadow, making the denominator of the aforementioned issues the same: as Nisetich writes, "Race itself may be a fiction, but the act of passing demonstrates that the concept of race still matters. Otherwise the need or desire to pass would not exist" (Nisetich 357). Racial identity for Bennett, then, becomes a realm of possibility in which black agency and white domination exist in a complicated and argumentative union.

For the purposes of situating Bennett's novel as contributory to the tradition of American passing literature. Bennett's "The Vanishing Half" boasts a stylishly designed book cover. The cover, featuring a multi-color blocked graphic, with pinks, blues, yellows, and greens, suggests an artistic representation of the binary racial codes the novel rebels against. The two female profiles on the cover, which one can assume are meant to represent the novel's two protagonists, further present the book as being one in which a female protagonist(s) asserts some degree of agency. The book's jacket, complete with a gold sticker announcing it to be a "Good Morning America Book Club Pick!" can be found on the coffee tables and bookshelves of wealthy white women who read them in their predominantly white book clubs, as well as on the New York Times bestseller list, (a 39-week resident on the list, to be exact, as of September 2021

(“Hardcover Fiction”). As will be explored later in this analysis, Bennett’s book has garnered major attention amongst white and/or middle to upper-middle class readers, even landing itself the title of “One of Barack Obama’s Favorite Books of the Year” (GoogleBooks). The unique way in which Bennett has marketed her book, however, to white audiences, endorsed by post-racial America’s first black president, indicates the intensely calculated approach Bennett takes in communicating the essentiality of the white buy-in to the phenomenon of passing.

To be clear, a post-racial era is one in which, according to NPR Senior News Analyst, Daniel Schorr, “...as embodied by Obama, is the era where civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history and Americans begin to make race-free judgments on who should lead them” (Schorr). Though, as Schorr states, the post-racial worldview was popularized within the Obama era, accompanied by the idea that the success of a single black person has nullified a history of black oppression, Bennett regards post-racial ideology as a myth, evident through her commentary on lightness and the still-present desire for light people to pass in “The Vanishing Half.” The post-racial world, then, is one that has proclaimed itself as having defeated racism and is venturing well on its way to being color-blind or, as Schorr refers to it, “color-blurred” (Schorr). The problem with this worldview, among many, is that it still disproportionately benefits and values the opinions of white people over the testimonies of the oppressed, a cornerstone argument made by the Black Lives Matter movement, which rose to popularity in the summer of 2020. As David T. Goldberg writes, “The post racial is racism’s contemporary articulation.” He continues, “In that sense, the post-racial is to the history of race what the postcolonial is to the history of colonialism—its contemporary mode of articulation. Post-raciality, in short, is the new racism” (Goldberg).

Bennett, then, contributes her passing narrative to an allegedly post-racial moment that has determined to have consigned racial prejudice neatly to the past. Bennett complicates the existence of blackness, asserting it to be contemporarily something that is at once driven by both black agency and a continuance of white dominion. I acknowledge that “post-racial” does not have the same connotation to each individual: to those who experience the brunt of racism, “post-raciality” is merely a social fallacy, while to others, post-racial is a theoretical marker of socio-historical moment. For the purposes of this analysis, however, “post-racial” will be used to refer to the “rhetoric rather than reality” (Love and Tolsolt 1) surrounding the current, 21st century political moment from which Bennett writes.

Like many writers of passing novels, Bennett aligns Stella’s initial “passing over” as being one that she does not initially set out to accomplish. Rather, Stella finds herself judged to be White, but decides to act through accepting the assumption of her identity as a white woman. Blake Sanders exemplifies the complexity of this situation in his blind assumption that Stella is white. Having come from the town of Mallard, in which Stella and Desiree are valued for their lightness, it is not until Stella begins a relationship with her future husband, Blake Sanders, that she begins reaping what Bennett asserts as the full-fledged benefits of whiteness and the associated proximity to it: socio-economic stability, privacy, social respect.

Although one could argue that Stella’s first assuming of the benefits of whiteness occurs when she obtains a job at as a white saleswoman at a local department store, Stella does not begin benefitting from the benefits of whiteness in all aspects of her life until she has fully, “passed over.” Bennett writes, “When [Stella] was with Blake, no one bothered her. The leering white men who’d tried to flirt with her at her stop suddenly fell silent; the colored men sitting in the back didn’t even look in her direction” (187). Bennett continues, “This life wasn’t real. If

Blake knew who she truly was, he would send her out of the office before she could even pack her things. But what had changed about her? Nothing, really. She hasn't adopted a disguise or even a new name. She'd walked in a colored girl and left a white one. She had become white only because everyone thought she was" (188). A similar rhetorical pattern which articulates the omission of responsibility regarding one's own racial identity is echoed in James Weldon Johnson's "Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,": at one point in his journey, the unnamed narrator remarks that he will allow whoever is around him to take him for whomever they believe him to be (Weldon Johnson). Likewise, Blake unknowingly offers Stella the identity that he wants her to be and she accepts, an exchange that invokes Stella's agency in her acceptance of her assumed racial identity. This exchange, implicative of an economic transaction, blurs the hierarchy of power that might initially be read as existing between Blake and Stella, with Blake as the actor and Stella as the one acted upon. Stella is no longer merely the manipulated, but chooses to oblige Blake's mistake, ultimately resulting in their mutual incurring of social capital: Blake obtains the woman he wants in the way that he wants her, while Stella is given the opportunity to accept a racial identity that she has occasionally performed over the course of her life. This time, however, unlike the many instances in her past, she accepts the opportunity to *permanently* become white.

Although there are many other examples in which Bennett explores passing as a phenomenon that is as much a form of white control as it is black agency, namely through Stella's internal monologue as it relates to Blake Sanders, the moment that Blake assumes Stella to be white is particularly pivotal. For Bennett, Stella's assumption of whiteness is the alternative to the stark black and white color line. In the stark social divisiveness of the black and white color line, there is no distribution of power like there is in an exchange where both parties are

understood to have something of value to present. Therefore, Stella and Blake's initial meeting, described above, indicates a delicate interplay between Blake's white supremacy in his assumption of Stella's identity and Stella's own assertion of agency in accepting this new identity. Lucy McKeon writes of the presence of whiteness in the allegedly visible aspects of race: "If white people can't actually tell who is white and who isn't, whiteness is exposed as simply the external perception of *being white* — the privilege, power, and civic membership afforded to someone recognized as such. This is white supremacy in practice" (McKeon). Blake Sanders approaches Stella from a place of white privilege, seen in his ability to assume and offer whiteness to Stella based on observable attributes considered to be characteristic of whiteness. Blake's assumption of who Stella is and the identity that Stella adopts as a result is a primary mechanism through which Bennett explores how white supremacist-thought and black agency operate in conversation and at-odds with each other.

Though scholars have constructed various definitions of passing and its place in literature, the comparative analysis of which will be important in considering where Bennett's novel fits in the historical and social trajectory of racial commentary, the close associations Bennett's novel makes between power, proximity, and race are particularly evident in Stella's relationship with Blake Sanders. For Bennett, passing is a form of social capital, another allusion to the concept of passing as an economic formality, in which one gains privilege but loses a sense of self, as Stella's internal monologue reveals throughout the novel. Like in many passing novels, Bennett uses passing for Stella as a mechanism to convey the antiquated binary with which race is understood, particularly by white people. To Blake, Stella is either black or she is white. The possibility that she might be biracial does not even occur to him in the 1950s New Orleans setting in which Blake meets Stella. The ease with which Blake considers Stella to be

White and the complex mix of compliance and choice with which she chooses to accept her new identity demands from Stella a sort of forced autonomy.

Because of the ambiguity regarding Stella's choice in her new identity, Stella's passing has more internal implications about identity and the ability for an individual to choose it for themselves than it does the obvious external implications characteristic of previous passing novels. The historical moment in which Bennett writes, which can be referred to as a moment caught in the tension between BLM and post-racial beliefs, presents the phenomenon of passing as one that has considerable implications regarding, what Nate Sloan phrases as "white perceptions of racial difference in America" (Sloan). Bennett creatively economizes off of white perceptions of racial difference to further argue the fallacy of post-raciality and to highlight the need for recognition of such a fallacy, creatively setting the plot within the racial tensions of the late 20th century. Bennett does this in a way that mirrors and reflects our current 21st century cultural moment. Bennett also toys with the different ways passing can be practiced beyond just race: economically, socially, and in terms of gender identification, though these iterations of passing will not be the main emphasis of the subsequent analysis.

WHAT IS PASSING?

Passing has been defined by scholars with varying levels of reference to the conjunction between culture and color. The act of racial passing comes from a long history of racial oppression and is defined by Lucy McKeon as "the external perception of *being white* — the privilege, power, and civic membership afforded to someone recognized as such" (McKeon). Passing studies, therefore, analyzes the motivations and effects of passing in action or, as Gayle Wald describes, serves to "illuminate complex questions of performance (how we "do" who we "are") knowledge

(how we “know” who we “are”), and authenticity (how we validate ourselves or receive validation for who we “are”)” (Wald X). Wald, like McKeon, understands passing as a practice which largely concerns the external perception of how an individual moves through the world. Because the external perception of the individual is so instrumental in configuring the internal motivations of the individual doing the passing, it is nearly impossible to unfurl the choice of the passer from external perception that allows that choice in the first place. The same potential for performance based on an anticipated external social expectation is vocalized by Saidyia Hartmann about “performing blackness”:

It is important to remember that blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity; thus blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference. Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle. (Hartmann 57)

Hartmann, though writing about the subjection of the black body before during and after Slavery, identifies a key aspect of racial performativity: it takes two parties, one to perform and the other to buy into the performance. Hartmann’s idea of racial identity being contingent on “social relationality” grants insight into just how volatile and subjective the system of racial categorization is. It is in this ambiguous space between the initial control initiated by the white figure’s assumption and the subsequent agency exerted in the black figure’s acceptance or denial of that assumption (or vice versa) that Bennett situates her focus.

Therefore passing itself is intentionally paradoxical: racial passing is a surrender to white cultural norms, while also being a source of economization on belief that race can be exclusively

denoted and categorized; racial passing is performance, yet in some cases it is expression of Self; racial passing is a loss of Self, but simultaneously reads as a way to become adopted into high ranks of social currency. The multiplicity of the word, “passing,” is part of its power. Colloquially, of course, it is not uncommon to request the salt to be “passed,” nor is it inappropriate to refer to a relative’s death as them having “passed away.” Though it might elicit a head turn or two, hearing a generation above suggesting that you “pass over a bridge” on walk or hike is not completely out of the ordinary, and each child at least once in their lifetime has exclaimed, “I passed!” upon receiving a passing grade.

While there are many more uses of the word “Pass” present in the Oxford English Dictionary’s Online record of the word’s historical evolution, it is especially notable that not one of these entries details passing as referring to the specific crossing over from one race, gender, sexual categorization, or class affiliation. The multiplicity of passing as an active verb exists in an array of instances, but the closest the OED comes to the understanding of “pass” as a form of identity change is, “A way to pass through. A course road or route; a way into or out of somewhere” (OED “Pass”). Therefore, for the purposes of clarity throughout the following pages, “passing” should be understood as a word accompanied by every one of the assumptions and implications with which it is usually received. Racial passing, then, is a noun, performing as a metaphor to represent a state of being; racial passing takes the associated aspects of its active state and transfers those denotations to new use. Interestingly, the very metaphor of passing itself is often difficult to detect because racial passing is concealed under more popular usages of the word. The very concept of passing is, therefore, contained within its own name, allowed by the rules of the English language a grammatical transition through which it can move from one place to another, undetected.

Passing is merely a way to move through the world, and therefore, we all “pass” (or perform) in one way or another. *Racial* passing, however, is distinct in the tension it begets between the Self-drawn Self and the Self that is constructed by external factors. Also considering the connotations of the phrase, “racial passing,” Lucy McKeon writes that the very notion of racial “passing” implies a test.” She continues, touching on the physical implications of the phenomenon,

Those who believed clear racial categorization was possible might test for race by measuring physical traits to indicate “blood purity”: slight physical traits that could be identified, such as the half-moon of a nail bed or the whites of ones eyes. In apartheid South Africa, the “pencil test” was devised: categorizing people based on whether a pencil would remain or fall from their hair. Physical markers were used to fix and control whole futures. (McKeon)

McKeon’s focus on the physical origins of racial passing are important because they communicate the extent to which race has historically been essentialized to encompass external appearance. Like Blake Sander’s failure to consider that Stella might identify as biracial, or something beyond his conception of the black/white racial binary, the belief that race can be measured by appearance thrives off of particular standards of what characterizes “Whiteness” and “Blackness.”

W. E. B. Dubois popularized the idea of the color line, touched on by McKeon above, which he articulates in “The Souls of Black Folks”: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War” (DuBois 9). Dubois’ color line and its relationship to the observable characteristics of race

is important to consider in analyzing the evolution of racial passing from the 20th to the 21st century, particularly as race has evolved from being a strictly visible concept within the “one-drop rule.” The one drop rule is defined in the “Racial Classification” chapter of the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences as being “a person of multiracial ancestry, who had known or visible African ancestry, is legally classified as “black,” regardless of appearance, cultural training, and self-identification” (Darity 40). According to this definition of the one-drop rule, race is determined strictly by biological circumstances, whether they are reflected in an individual’s appearance or not. DuBois’ concept of the color line will be integral in understanding the evolution of passing literature, particularly in terms of how the one-drop rule still undergirds the racial perspective of Bennett’s characters; the fear of being “found out” that Stella maintains throughout the novel is rooted not only in the hiding of her own identity but also in the protection of her daughter, Kennedy’s, which is a common trope of passing literature.

Finally, Randall Kennedy defines passing as “a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct,” acknowledging the difference between someone who is mistaken as being white, “holds himself out to be white” and someone who actively decides to pass as white as being the agency and choice required to do so (Kennedy 1). Kennedy’s definition of passing, however, does not account for Stella’s situation, in which she is *both* mistaken as being white and “holds himself out to be white” (Kennedy 1). It is the “both/and” of Stella’s passing scenario that allows Bennett to explore both identity as it is defined by others and identity as it is defined by oneself. In a flashback, Bennett reveals to us the moment that Stella becomes Miss Vignes, a white woman, by proxy of allying herself with Blake, a white man. Blake invites Stella to accompany him in a move to Boston after receiving a job offer, not

for once considering that Stella might not identify as being as white as she looked. Bennett narrates Stella's omniscient thought-response: "They hadn't even kissed yet, but his question sounded as serious as a marriage proposal. 'Just say yes,' he said, and the word tasted like cherries, sweet and tart and easy. Yes, and just like that she could become Miss Vignes for good" (Bennett 196). She continues, "For the first time in her life, she didn't worry about any of the practical details when she told Blake Sanders yes. The hardest part about becoming someone else was deciding to" (Bennett 197). Here, Bennett exposes the second rung of the two-tiered "passing ladder": the black acceptance of their own mistaken racial identity. Bennett will go on to expose the ways in which the two-step process of racial passing demands an assumption that whiteness is both visible and invisible.

CHOICE AND IDENTITY THROUGHOUT PASSING LITERATURE

Despite the difficulty of grappling with passing as an inarguable allusion to social privilege in a self-proclaimed "post-racial" world, the modern import of passing is, in part, due to the fact that the post-racial worldview has not always undergirded the passing novel. As the world has evolved, so have the implications and social acceptance of passing and Bennett, by encompassing previously unexplored aspects of passing such as the implications of gender, performance, and twin-ship, asserts a new vocalization of this age-old act. In describing the passing novel written by Jessie Redmon Fauset, "Plum Bun," Deborah McDowell describes the hallmarks of traditional passing novels:

A mulatta protagonist, seeking to avoid the constraints of color prejudice in the United States, decides to cross the color line and pass for white, a deception fraught with anxieties and frequently discovered. After learning that life on the other side is not

without its difficulties, she develops an appreciation of black life and culture and returns "home," psychically if not physically, to the black community and embraces its values.

(McDowell 65)

While there are surely particular, plot-specific exceptions to these tropes, the general flow of the passing novel described by McDowell is helpful in exploring the principle of choice within racial passing. For example, as McDowell sees it, the black female protagonist "decides to cross the color line," but in Bennett's conception of Stella's passing, Stella must first be *mistaken* for white before the opportunity is allowed. The privileging of the body in racial identification has been alluded to throughout passing literature, though not as evidently or complexly as Bennett does in "The Vanishing Half." Analysis of these obscure allusions to the concept of choice within passing novels of the past can most clearly assist in understanding the relationship between the visible body and individual identity.

SENNA, "CAUCASIA": PASSING AS INFLUENCED BY CONTEXT

At the edge of the 21st century comes Danzy Senna's 1998 novel, "Caucasia," a novel which marks its place in the symbolic trajectory of passing narratives through its focus on passing as it is influenced by context. Unlike Larsen, Hurst, and Bennett's novels, which imagine the light-skinned, black female protagonist as being able to pass as white, Senna inverts the racial "longings" of her female protagonist by interweaving those longings with the wishes of her parents and sister. Birdie Lee, the novel's adolescent female protagonist, is relentlessly mistaken for being white and forced by her Caucasian mother to pass as such, which creates an inevitable internal struggle for Birdie who, in adolescence, only wanted to be darker like her sister. Birdie's sister, Cole, who is much darker in appearance, is detailed by Senna as teaching Birdie how to

“act” black: the “right” way to do her hair; the speech patterns to follow in order to “sound black”; the boys she should date. In the context of 1975 Roxbury and Boston, Massachusetts, Birdie desires and succeeds in passing as black.

When Birdie’s parent’s marriage falls apart, her father and his new black girlfriend take Birdie’s darker sister, Cole, and move to Brazil, leaving Birdie and her white mother behind. After having relocated to New Hampshire, Birdie’s mother tells her that their new identities are those of the wife and mother of a late Jewish professor, convinced that the government is after them due to their affiliation with the Black Power Movement. Most interesting about this power dynamic is that, despite the presence of the traditional black-to-white passing transition, Birdie’s white mother ultimately holds the deciding-power over her black daughter. Forced not only to pass within both a race and religion to which she does not belong, the ease with which Birdie has in passing as a white Jewish girl is assisted by the regional norms of the Northeastern New Hampshire location.

Throughout Birdie’s character timeline, Senna uses the DuBosian color line to distort traditional passing archetypes. In doing so, “Caucasia ” offers a historical moment of obscurity that a linear analysis between Larsen and Bennett’s novels would otherwise not. Senna is said to be one of the first authors to intentionally distort the archetypal passing novel, including features in her narrative like having her main character, Birdie, pass as both black and white at different points in her life, in addition to situating the same protagonist within the delicate binds of adolescence when she first begins to pass. Senna also presents nuances within an otherwise adjourned conversation surrounding passing, paralleling the prioritization of whiteness in white communities with similar standards and expectations of race within black communities. In her book, “Tragic No More,” Caroline Streeter writes of Birdie’s discovery, “African Americans,

like whites, police the ambiguous boundaries of race and reject those who do not meet the community's standard of racial authenticity" (Streeter 71). Even daring to present passing as having both physical, linguistic, and social aspects that apply to whiteness as well as blackness, Senna humanizes and complicates blackness in a way that had not been done before. Her presentation of biraciality, as well as a mechanism of power indicates the beginning of a resistance to the tragic mulatto trope that was formerly characteristic of passing novels.

HURST/SIRK, "IMITATION OF LIFE": PASSING AS ONSCREEN PERFORMANCE

While film is not necessarily more effective than novel in communicating the invisible elements of racial passing, film offers the unique opportunity for both the plot and the artistic decisions of the director to be analyzed, resulting in a two-fold commentary about the cultural passing moment. Douglas Sirk's 1959 film adaptation of "Imitation of Life" reflects the traditional practice of casting of white actors to play black or mixed race characters. Lucy McKeon references Dion Boucicault's 1959 play, *The Octoroon*, as well as the films *Imitation of Life* "(1959, a remake of the 1934 original, both adaptations of Fannie Hurst's original 1933 novel of the same name)" and Kazan's *Pinky* (1949), to point out the mechanism of choice within storylines that have historically dealt with passing. In the case of Sirk's characters, the practice of white actors to pass as the black characters they are playing conflates real white power structures with those that are otherwise fictionalized. The inclusion of these different artistic modalities of passing are not only important because of their obvious diegesis commonalities with Bennett's novel, but also because films and plays have the privilege of delivering visibly tangible aspects of racial perception by the director that novels cannot.

In regards to the plot of *Imitation of Life*, Annie's daughter, Sarah Jane, is light-skinned enough that she is repeatedly mistaken for being white, an identity which she herself adopts, ardently rejecting a black identity. In McKeon's analysis of *Imitation of Life* and Kazan's *Pinky*, she writes, "by not correcting external perception, Sarah Jane and Pinky are guiltily implicated in their passing. Both films champion pride of origins to the point of seeming to essentialize identity as immutable. Passing is amoral deception" (McKeon). The accusation that the female protagonists of these films are "guiltily implicated," rather than being perceived as merely agential in the coining of their own identities, implies their upset of a system that hinges on visibly recognized whiteness.

This artistic choice comes with obvious implications regarding the perception of what it means to "perform as black," though Sirk's decision is particularly interesting when considering the casting of a black actor to play the mulatta character, Peola, in Stahl's original film twenty-five years earlier. In her piece, "Passing Films and the Illusion of Racial Equality, Karen Bowdry writes, "For a character to act Black means conforming to gross stereotypes" (Bowdry 34). Sirk's casting of white actors to play black characters connects directly to Bowdry's point about conforming to stereotypes; not only do Sirk's creative choices undo any progression away from racial prejudice made by Stahl in the casting decisions of his 1934 film, but his casting of white actors to black roles also requires a degree of both conscious and subliminal perceptions of racial characteristics. Despite the fact that the plot itself does not explicitly discuss the artistic choices of the directors in their casting decisions, the messages available to the viewer of a film regarding passing and power are much more apparent than one might initially expect.

Similarly to the opportunity that film gives its viewers to analyze the director's casting prerogatives is the opportunity to analyze directorial decisions regarding presentations of gender.

Though the presence of gender passing in previous passing pieces is not as apparent as it is in Bennett's, "The Vanishing Half," the artistic interpretations of masculinity and femininity are important to consider as expressions of particular eras. In choosing to focus on the relationships between black and white women, represented in the film as Annie, the maid, as well as the passing of Lora in the position of what would conventionally be considered the male's role, Sirk's film adaptation also explores a version of gender passing. While Bennett's novel reveals a 21st century-relevant understanding of gender passing, with Desiree's daughter, Jude, in a romantic relationship with a transgender male named Reese, "Imitation of Life" observes women who engages in the otherwise male-dominated workforce. The film features two mothers, white female protagonist, Lora, and her black maid friend, Annie Johnson, the former of whom takes Annie and her daughter, Sarah Jane in, leaving her daughter, Susie, in the care of Annie so that she can pursue her dream of being a Broadway actress (Sirk). In disrupting these social boundaries, Sirk's film adaptation presented, for the first time in passing-cinematography (not including John Stahl's earlier 1934 film adaptation), a tableau of passing as a way of examining a variety of social inequities while simultaneously tipping a hat to the gendered norms that would've likely been held by the viewers of the film.

LARSEN, "PASSING": A LONELY VENTURE

Larsen's 1929 novel, "Passing," embodies the Dubosian color line, and in doing so, asserts passing as a lonely venture which involves so poignant a loss of community and a loss of Self that the possibility of privilege in whiteness almost ceases to exist. Though Larsen's novel

was published before Sirk and Senna's aforementioned pieces, I have chosen to analyze Larsen immediately before Bennett in the hopes of drawing parallels between their similarities and intentional deviations that Bennett has taken from the novel that she self-admittedly credits with inspiring her own novel.

Nella Larsen's novel, "Passing," was published at the height of the Harlem Renaissance and is one among many in the early canon of passing literature, referred to as a conglomerate by Kathryn Rummell as novels that "reinforce the one-drop rule of blackness as well as the notion of "blackness" itself" (Rummell 1). Larsen's novel explores the friendship of two women, one who lives as black and passes when convenient for her (Irene Redfield), and one who solely passes as white (Clare Kendry). Reflected in the women's characters is the privilege that accompanies whiteness and the lack thereof associated with blackness. In her article, "Rewriting the Passing Novel: Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*," Rummell continues, "While the novels may argue that individuals should be able to choose their racial identity, they nonetheless reduce the choices to whiteness or blackness" (Rummell 1). The conceptualization of race as a visible concept, both inspired and reinforced by the cultural moment, offers Larsen fertile ground to assert racial passing as a choice that is necessarily accompanied and complicated by the lonesomeness of the act itself. The passing protagonist, Clare Kendry, is hardly able to "enjoy" the associated social privileges obtained through passing as white because of how paranoid she becomes of being discovered.

The constant concern that Clare has of being discovered throughout "Passing" is not at all unlike that revealed in Bennett's internal monologuing of Stella, as they both become so internally consumed with managing their external perception that they descend into spirals of unperceivable loneliness. In her essay, "Reading Race in Nella Larsen's 'Passing' and the

Rhineland Case,” Rebecca Nisetich constructs an argument about the magnitude of the color line in defining race by highlighting the importance that Larsen places on race as being visibly noticeable. To make this argument, Nisetich draws on Larsen’s invocation of the Rhineland Case through Irene Redfield, who is concerned that the racist husband of fellow protagonist Clare Kendry might react if he were to discover his wife’s true racial identity. In Larsen’s novel, Irene thinks, “What if Bellew should divorce Clare? Could he? There was the Rhineland Case” (Larsen 122). The Rhineland case referenced by Irene is summarized by Nisetich for her argumentative purposes: “Leonard Rhineland was a member of one of New York's oldest and richest families; his bride, Alice Jones, was the daughter of working-class English immigrants. When reports surfaced that George Jones, Alice's father, was "colored," what had been a modern-day Cinderella story erupted into a full-blown public scandal (3). Two weeks after the press declared that Rhineland's bride was "colored" he sued for annulment” (4). Ultimately Alice Jones won the case, contrary to the fate of Clare Kendry who, instead of facing the horror of being exposed for her mixed race in court like Alice Jones, “passes” through the window and falls to her death, alone.

The reference to the Rhineland Case in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* models the posture sustained towards race for centuries: it must be visibly assessable. And, in order for the visible assessability of the individual doing the passing to be believable, a sense of secrecy and abandonment is necessary. Larsen’s intent in including the Rhineland Case in her novel poses a question not dissimilar to that of Bennett’s: Is passing a result of his failure to “read” her race or is it her intention to deceive him? Nisetich notes that the dominant argumentation tactic of Alice’s lawyers was to prove to the jury that “she could not have deceived her husband, that her "race" was obvious” (345). According to this logic, the visibility of race places all agency in the

hands of the interpreter, though it is the passer's responsibility to make their racial identity so foolproof that they could never possibly be discovered. The subtle invocation of the Rhinelander Case in Larsen's novel begins a conversation regarding the place of interpretation when it comes to race, though the fate of Clare Kendry does not reflect a confidence in her ever winning out over the testimony of her husband if her true identity is discovered. As Miriam Thaggert proposes,

Both the novel and the trial center on the assumption of an always decipherable, easily readable black body. The novel disrupts a racial and sexual "legibility," the meanings derived from stereotypes, by simultaneously hindering the reader's act of interpreting Clare and making the reader question the interpretative practices of Irene - just as the jury in the Rhinelander trial must decide to which racial category Alice belongs and judge Leonard's ability to "read" his wife. (Thaggert 3)

As Thaggert argues, the presumption that men are able to "read" the female body is crucial to the conversation surrounding choice in racial identification. While Larsen merely hints at this issue of the visibly assessable female body, subliminally gesturing to the irony of the agency, otherwise read as the loneliness, that Clare exhibits when she ultimately chooses to take her own life. Bennett elaborates on this notion through Stella's acceptance of the identity she is given and her subsequent, unending internal struggle between the racial and social identity she has adopted and the identity she has lived the first half of her life with.

While Larsen's reference to the Rhinelander Case does indicate the dependence held in former passing novels on the visible perception of race and the loneliness that accompanies the isolation required of a successful "pass," this is not to say that novel's like Larsen's "Passing" do not hint at underlying factors of race. Larsen does, indeed, hint at the invisible, external factors

by which people determine and categorize race, but does not define them like Bennett chooses to. For example, after “jokingly” referring to his wife, Clare, as “Nig” in front of Irene, who is passing as white, Irene asks John Bellew if he had ever met a black person: “ ‘Thank the Lord, no!... I read in the paper about them. Always robbing and killing people.’ And, he added darkly, ‘worse’” (Larsen 44). While the perspective that Bellew holds of blackness is not necessarily surprising for a man of his day and age, he does not elaborate on what he means (as if it needs any elaboration), and instead, goes on about the conversation. The subliminally-held associations that Bellew holds about blackness and whiteness offer a comprehensive behavioral guide for his wife to follow: if Clare never “rob[s]” or “kill[s]” anyone, he’ll never assume her to be black.

The one-dimensionality with which Bellew views race is obviously problematic, but what is equally striking about the singularity of Bellew’s racial views is the mirroring singularity with which Clare lives and eventually dies; John Bellew never realizes the secret she has been keeping from him. Clare’s concern and anxiety in keeping the secret of her true identity from her husband could be said to outweigh any privileges that may have accompanied her assumed identity as a white woman. As is referenced above, this paranoia-induced individualism is mimicked in Bennett’s presentation of Stella, though the internal-monologue outlined within “The Vanishing Half” is much more detailed and comprehensive than that of Larsen’s.

BENNETT, “THE VANISHING HALF”: ARTICULATING THE UNSEEN

While passing novels prior to Bennett’s have always communicated intangible aspects of race through the depiction and discernment of their characters, the focus on those intangible aspects has generally been surface-level. The film adaptation of Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*

introduces the concept of being “guiltily implicated” (McKeon) in one’s passing, and Larsen’s *Passing* is concerned with the particularities of visible perception, specifically as these perceptions concern class identities. Ultimately, “Caucasia” is focused on the manipulation of Birdie’s biracial adolescent identity, particularly as it is able to be manipulated in accordance with a variety of different locations, backgrounds, and cultural contexts. Bennett, however, aims to further complicate the complex reality of passing by quantifying for her reader the otherwise unseen aspects that contribute to being perceived as one race or another. It is only through the contributions of these authors, however, that Bennett is allowed space to complicate the terrain of choice and agency as it relates to passing.

Where the aforementioned McDowell (1995), along with Hurst, Senna, and Larsen, are focused on the “sign of the body” and the privileges afforded to it when the barriers associated with a visibly dark body are removed, Bennett aims to complicate this notion by asserting there to be more to racial perception than just that which is visible. Bennett juxtaposes the actions of the twins to indicate that Stella has honed certain intangible qualities that make her whiteness more believable. When Desiree gives a faltering response upon being asked by a security guard in a department store what she’s doing there, Early tells her that she is “Too pushy.” He continues, instructing her about performing whiteness as though she is the lead in a school play, “You gotta have a soft touch. You come across too desperate, folks sense it... You gotta go in there like somebody they tell things to... Somebody that gets what she wants” (74). Stella, though visibly identical to her twin sister, through her contrasting success in passing, has perfected the intangibility of what it means to be perceived as white.

The less visible aspects associated with race, such as speech and social associations, which serve Bennett’s intent in presenting passing as a more intensely complicated concept than

her predecessors did, are afforded by the narrative omniscience of both Stella and Desiree. Stella's constant internal struggle throughout her actively passing as white, as well as Desiree's memories of Stella's public perception before she left New Orleans construct a delicate juxtaposition of two women who share an identical appearance, but an un-identical ability and desire to pass. To Stella, the choice seems obvious. In a moment of internal monologue, she reflects on her decision to pass over so many years ago: "She had become white because it was practical, so practical at that time, her decision seemed laughably obvious. Why wouldn't you be white if you could be? Remaining what you were or becoming something new, it was all a choice, any way you looked at it. She had just made the rational decision" (225). The emphasis on choice within Stella's recurrent monologue does not negate the fact that she is first offered the chance to make that choice by being mistaken as white. Bennett's decision to present her two protagonists as identical twins allows Bennett to underscore just how humanly fabricated and completely intangible the categorization of race is to begin with.

After Stella disappears in New Orleans, Adele Vignes speaks to Desiree in terms that indicate there being something different about Stella's ability and decision to pass throughout her childhood:

"She don't want to be found. You gotta let her go. Live her life.

"This ain't her life!" Desiree said. "None of it woulda happened if I didn't tell her to take that job. Or drag her to New Orleans, period. That city wasn't no good for Stella. You were right all along."

Her mother pursed her lips. "It wasn't her first time," she said.

"Ma'am?"

"Bein white," her mother said. "New Orleans was just her chance to do it for real." (68)

Out of her kinship with Desiree, Stella has been on the receiving end of choices made for her throughout her entire life. It was Desiree's idea to escape Mallard for New Orleans, all Stella had to do was oblige. Imitating a similar dynamic, it was the woman at the Maison Blanche building who had mistaken her for white. Stella, then, according to the "formula" required of individuals who are passing, must accept the whiteness offered as a gift.

Although the act of passing requires the agential decision of the black individual to accept the identity of whiteness, it is interesting to consider the degree to which Bennett articulates passivity as being an element of the acting white female. The acceptance of the "gift of whiteness" by the passer can be interpreted equally as an active and a passive act, though one does not necessarily negate the other. It is the passivity practiced by Stella throughout her childhood that she has come to perfect in her adulthood which leads to her successful passing over. This same passivity could be said to characterize the role of a white female in the late 20th century. As is echoed in Early's instructions to Desiree to be less "pushy" (74), Desiree, as the acting leader between the twins, has not adopted this passivity in the same way, which suggests she lacks an attribute essential to having success in passing as a white woman. Bennett's speculation regarding the blendedness required of the white female during the late 20th century is reflected in Stella's daughter, an actress. Bennett writes, "Strange that the greatest compliment an actress could receive was that she had disappeared into somebody else. Acting is not about being seen, a drama teacher told her once. True acting meant becoming invisible so that only the character shone through" (267). For Bennett, Kennedy's character serves the purpose of allegorizing the act of passing through an actress-on-stage metaphor. Disappearing into someone else is exactly what Stella does using what cannot be mistaken as anything but trained and highly crafted performativity. Despite the decisiveness over which Stella sustains her decision to pass as

white, the consistent internal monologue throughout the novel reflects the loss she experiences as a result.

Bennett's intent on exposing the invisible aspects of race at play in the perception of whiteness is also seen in Stella's paranoia of being discovered by her black neighbor, the mother of a black family who has recently moved into the otherwise all-white neighborhood in which Stella and her family live. After Reg and Loretta Walker move in across the street from Blake and Stella, Stella is so afraid of being "found out" that she vocally opposes it at an HOA meeting, ultimately overcompensating for a reality that hasn't even occurred to the white people in her neighborhood. After her first brief interaction with Loretta, the paranoid Stella "gripped the wheel tightly during the whole drive to school, rewinding the conversation in her head." Stella's thoughts continue after the interaction: "That woman's easy smile. Why did she feel so comfortable speaking to Stella in the first place? Did she see something in her, even across the street, that she felt like she could trust?" (161). An otherwise meaningless interaction between neighbors, Stella's fear of being discovered as a black woman is riddled with insecurity about the things that she might otherwise be unable to hide from a fellow black woman; in carrying on the metaphor of performance, this insecurity might be read as a sort of performance anxiety. Stella, in some sense, is stuck between performing as white and actually feeling white. After all, passing doesn't necessarily mean that the individual doing the passing *feels* white, it only means that everyone else thinks they are.

Stella's constant internal monologue throughout the novel is indicative of the aspect of loss present throughout most, if not all, passing novels. As Larsen motions to the singularity and lonesomeness that accompanies passing in her novel, *Passing*. Bennett mimics this articulation of loneliness through Stella in a more visceral way by characterizing Loretta in the role of a

pseudo-twin, a sort of mirror to her racial identity which she internalizes as equally threatening and desirable. In imagining Loretta discovering her true identity, Stella's omniscient character offers the reader the paradoxical desires accompanied by the act of passing. Fantasizing about what Loretta would do if she found out that Stella was black like her, Bennett orchestrates a fictitious narrative for her reader: "She would tell [Loretta] because, in spite of everything, Loretta was her only friend in the world." Stella, though comforted by the possibility of being truly known, finds equal comfort in the safety net she is assured through her public identity as white, thinking, "Because she knew that, if it came down to her word versus Loretta's, she would always be believed. And knowing this, she felt, for the first time, truly white" (Bennett 201).

Bennett impresses the complexity of passing upon her reader by presenting it in a multitude of iterations, accompanied by an array of emotions felt by the passer themselves (in this case, Stella). Most notably, however, is Bennett's fixation on differentiating between the concepts of being *seen* for what one wants to be versus being seen for who one actually is. Constantly fearful that Loretta will pick up on Stella's true identity like only her identical twin sister is able to do, Stella's friendship with Loretta is presented as the largest threat to the discovery of her identity. This "threat" is especially interesting when considering that Stella's fear of being discovered does not surface around the multitude of white people for whom she performs a particular version of blackness. Stella, throughout the majority of the novel, maintains her identity for who she wishes to be seen as. Rather, the real "threat" surfaces not only when Stella imagines Loretta to discover her true identity, but when Stella imagines that Loretta will reject her, denying Stella the privilege of actually being seen for who she actually is:

"I'm not one of them," she would say. "I'm like you."

"You're colored," Loretta would say. Not a question, but a statement of blunt fact.

“You don’t have to explain anything to me,” she would say. “It’s your life.”

“But it’s not,” Stella would say. “None of it belongs to me.”

“Well, you chose it,” Loretta would tell her. “So that makes it yours.” (201)

The relationship sustained between Stella and Loretta is one of a pseudo-sistership, which is ironic considering that Stella has willingly estranged herself from her biological twin sister. Bennett uses the sister-like relationship between Stella and Loretta which she poses as intentionally reminiscent of Stella and Desiree, to once again present the reader with the concept of choice in the decision to pass. Unlike the two-step process of passing that occurs in Stella’s relationship with Blake, in which Blake “offers” Stella whiteness in the form of assuming that she is, for Stella to accept or reject, Stella fantasizes that Loretta would “offer” her back her blackness in the form of exposing her. When Stella tries to disassociate her own part in her passing, Loretta reminds her that “you chose it...so that makes it yours” (201), asserting that Stella’s role in the formation of her new white identity is not one of passivity, but of ultimate agential determination. It can be inferred through Bennett’s verbiage, then, that Blackness, like whiteness, can be offered or extended as a “gift.”

CONCLUSION: “COMING HOME”?

One of the most readily identifiable nuances of Bennett’s modern passing novel is her refusal to fully “restore” Stella to the black community. As McDowell writes, “After learning that life on the other side is not without its difficulties, she develops an appreciation of black life and culture and returns “home,” psychically if not physically, to the black community and embraces its values” (McDowell 65). It should be noted that Bennett is working contrarily to what McDowell identifies as the typical ending for passing novels, though including McDowell in this analysis is

important for noting Bennett's divergence away from the traditional passing novel. While Stella does learn that being white does not dislodge the yearning for belonging that she holds deep within her, Bennett does not commit to the romanticized homecoming that is present in previous passing literature. The only physical death that occurs at the end of "The Vanishing Half" is that of Adele Vignes, which doesn't necessarily constitute the "tragic mulatta" archetype of Larsen's writings because her death happens naturally due to old age, and Stella only returns to Mallard one final time to visit her sister in a diner, asking for forgiveness. While it is true that Stella symbolically celebrates the life of her mother by giving Early and Desiree her own wedding ring to pay for Adele's funeral after learning of their mother's poor health, Stella departs from Mallard and never fully returns to her black community. When Desiree's daughter, Jude, calls Stella's daughter, Kennedy, to ask if Stella would want to be informed of Adele's passing, Kennedy replies that she would not.

Bennett's intentional obscuring of Stella's return to Mallard seems to be Bennett's subtle way of asking the reader what should be made of a passing novel in which the passer successfully passes over as white. Even the "success" of Stella's passing could be considered cryptic and vague, though, due to the internal unrest about her decision to pass Stella maintains throughout the novel, as well as the partial reunion she undergoes with Desiree. The individual (in this case, Stella), does not die; she is not dramatically outed by her white husband, and neither does she come to climactic confrontation with her black community. Stella has made her decision not only to pass as white, but to remain white. The novel ends with only Stella's black-identifying twin sister and Stella's white-identifying daughter knowing her true identity.

Without digressing into an entire analysis of what is considered "successful" in the realm of racial passing, it is evident that Bennett presents the conclusion of her passing character's

journey as one that is as visibly complicated as the rest of her novel. Where Stella could be considered to have undergone a deferred return home, with Desiree bearing the burdens that accompany their dying mother, she could just as easily be considered an archetypal figure who suffers the symbolic death of her black self through her successful passing over into a white identity. The openness of Bennett's conclusion doubles as a commentary on white supremacy: as James Weldon Johnson writes in "The Auto-Biography of an Ex-Colored Man," "It's no disgrace to be black, but it is often very inconvenient" (Weldon Johnson). Despite the discomfort that Bennett's ambiguous ending leaves, Bennett sustains through the ending an argument for complexity and situational relativity in racial passing that has not previously been accomplished; Bennett names the unseen elements of racial perception, therefore, rightfully complicating the reality of racial identification.

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