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# The Consequences of Crossing the Color Line: Identity and Racial Passing in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

**Abstract.** The article explores the concept of identity and the notion of transgressing the color line in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. Racial passing, in which light-skinned African Americans lived their lives as white people, is a trope present in numerous African American novels, notably Nella Larsen's *Passing*. Brit Bennett's novel returns to the once-popular trope of transgressing the color line in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States. Although Bennett subverts the trope as no tragedy befalls those who cross the line of the racial divide, the novel presents how one's race, circumstance, and choices shape not only one's own identity but also how they impact the next generation. Through the return to the past, Bennett's novel emphasizes the continued divide within American society. Based on the historical and cultural backdrop of the United States, as well as through the application of affect theory, the article explores to what degree one's race, choices, experienced violence, and society's stereotypes and prejudice impact how characters feel, behave, and define themselves. The focal point of the analysis is the exploration of two generations of women from one family and the examination of how differently their racial identities have been shaped.

**Keywords:** identity, race, transgressions, African Americans, racial passing

If we consider national collective identity in the United States from a historical perspective, for a long time only white people could be considered "true" Americans. People of color were not citizens with full rights, and even to this day, when they have equal legal rights, their skin color and heritage, which classify them as a minority, seem to challenge their identity within the national context as they are frequently referred to as African Americans or Asian Americans, and not simply Americans. Racial identity is a significant element of how individuals perceive themselves and how others perceive them.

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W.E.B. DuBois asserted that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (3). Although DuBois made the aforementioned statement more than a century ago, one need not wonder whether it continues to ring true, whether the issue of the color line is still pertinent, since the biological arguments behind racial divisions have been largely discredited and social origins are more vital in the discussion of race or racism. The persisting importance of the color line seems clear as numerous books and movies continue to spread awareness about the issue that for so long has been a part of the unacknowledged or dismissed history of black Americans. Not only already well-known books concerning the racial past are experiencing the renewed interest of the public (for example, Nella Larsen's *Passing* and its recent Netflix adaptation), but also numerous new works are exploring the topic, including *The Vanishing Half* penned by Brit Bennett. Bennett's novel shines a light on the (in)visible lines which divided American society in the past and how transgressing those lines altered not only the lives of individuals but also future generations, as well as how one person's decision to pass as white impacts the identities of others. This paper aims to briefly introduce the phenomenon of racial passing, as well as to explore how race, the affect of contempt and the process of identification influence the formation and alterations of identity in Bennett's novel, which illustrates this socially relevant (historical) phenomenon.

In the second half of the twentieth century the American psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins remarked on what he referred to as "the American problem of identity". He observed that:

> the increased preoccupation with identity problems arises in part from the multiplicity of kinds of achievement and the multiplicity of criteria which are a consequence of both the heterogeneity within a modern complex society and its rapid rate of change. The modern American is engaged in a quest for his identity because of an embarrassment of riches in his possible identities. (Tomkins 503)

Tomkins points to a multiplicity of possible identities as the source of modern Americans' issues with identification. However, if one considers the problem of selecting a singular, coherent identity in the context of African Americans, then it becomes clear that a similar problem predates what Tomkins refers to as 'modern society'. African Americans' struggle with multiple racial or ethnic identities reaches as far back as the first Africans brought to America.

Due to the complexity of the problem, African American identity has long been a topic of academic discussion. One of the most recognized voices in the debate on African American identity is W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois emphasized the dual nature of African American identity:

> [T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only

> lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8)

Although DuBois refers to the internal struggle of black Americans, this struggle also has a more external side. This duality places African Americans between two cultural identities, leaving them with a choice as to which cultural traditions to follow and identify with, or the challenge of balancing the two sides to one's identity. Despite the fact that the concept of identity is fluid and multiple types of identity exist, some types are more easily categorized.

Laura Browder points out that because race is often associated with biological features and ethnicity with culture, racial identity is a more widely recognized category than ethnic identity. (8) The prevalence of the topic of racial identity in the US seems to support Browder's observations. Nevertheless, ethnicity is often a vital part of African American identity, at least for some individuals. African American individuals whose families have maintained the traditions of their African ancestors have links to the African part of their identity. Those, however, who have only vague knowledge, or none at all, of their African predecessors and their culture, may feel mainly American, and identifying as part African might prove more challenging. Nowadays, with the rise of multiculturalism the choice of how one identifies belongs to the individual. Moreover, an identity once chosen may be redefined without the need to change one's whole life.

Marcia Alesan Dawkins notes that "[i]ncreasing discomfort with racial identification suggests that some declarations of multicultural identities could really be the latest incarnations of passing. What is more, growing color-blindness and 'color-mute'-ness could indicate a growing hostility toward any use of racial identification" (2–3). Although the changing society may assign less importance to adhering to once strict definitions regarding identification, identity—whether it be sexual, ethnic, racial or otherwise—remains an important part of life, both the internal emotional life and the external life within communities. In the past, however, the identity of black Americans was, to some extent, predefined by their lineage and society. If one had African ancestors, even very distant, they were automatically classified as African American, even though they might not have identified as such. This classification, this assignment of identity, had far-reaching consequences which varied depending on the time period: from forced slavery, to the lawfully-enforced use of separate substandard facilities, to open discrimination and violence.

No wonder then that some African Americans chose to hide their origins when an opportunity arose, to be classified as a white American and don the identity which came with the classification. Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins observes that "[w]hile both whites and blacks subsumed mixedness into blackness, both also considered mixed-race a distinctive racial 'other'" (14). Thus, light-skinned African Americans seemed to have been standing on the color line dividing American society, never truly belonging on either side, always transgressing the racial line wherever they were. Passing, whether for white or black (although the former was overwhelmingly more frequent), has long been a part of American society. Allyson Hobbs explains:

> the phenomenon of passing was reshaped in each historical period, the meaning and significance of passing also transformed. At times, passing was an act of rebellion against the racial regime; on other occasions, it was a challenge to African Americans' struggle to shape and nurture group identities and communities (8).

The mentioned changes often coincided with the existence of political and cultural movements. For example, during the Jim Crow era passers "deftly maneuver[ed] an increasingly restrictive and despairing racial climate", and during the "Harlem Renaissance ... [which] raised more questions about identity and racial categories than it could answer" passing seemed even more controversial from the white as well as the black perspective. (Hobbs 121, 214)

No matter the era, passing was always something that was to be kept secret. "Family members and friends were likely to keep matters in confidence, but on rare occasions, blacks betrayed those who were passing" (Hobbs 164). One could hypothesize why some chose to betray the passers; however, the more important question seems to be why the majority kept the secrets of strangers. Hobbs postulates that "[p]erhaps it was a larger sense of racial solidarity that compelled blacks to protect the identities of those who lived 'on the other side'" (164). No matter the reasons, because of the secrecy, which was a significant part of the phenomenon, the true scale of racial passing at any given time is impossible to be accurately assessed, especially because different types of passing exist.

G. Reginald Daniel observes: "Continuous passing, which involves a complete break with the African American community, has been the most sensational sort of crossing over" (51). Although discontinued (or part-time) passing could bring similar benefits to the passer when "positions of wealth, power, privilege, and prestige normally barred to individuals of African descent" were concerned, it did not involve complete separation from one's family and friends. (Daniel 53) Despite the high emotional price individuals had to pay in order to pass permanently, some did it to avoid the negative emotions linked to their mixed racial heritage. Daniel posits that some light-skinned individuals used "continuous passing ... [as] a way of escaping the social stigma and taunts of African

Americans who view[ed] them as less than black" (53). Regardless of the reasons and the gains, according to Elaine K. Ginsberg, "passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing" (2). The phenomenon also has two sides: "the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen", which makes it challenging to analyze from the outside, and thus its literary portrayals can be useful for its understanding. (Ginsberg 2)

As in life, so in literature, stories of passing are stories of a character's struggles with identity. Steven J. Belluscio explains what can be expected from forms of literature concerned with racial passing:

> In the *racial passing narrative,* a character attempts (successfully or not) to shed all overt evidence of racial difference and imperceptibly enter mainstream society. From the perspective of the author, this involves depicting one or more characters in such a manner that all discourses of racial difference (especially ones that would easily be read by other characters) are overwritten by discourses of American civic nationalism. ... Of course, literary passing involves a certain amount of dramatic irony that precludes the total erasure of racial discourse. ...The reader is almost always made aware of it [the passing], and very typically, the character's ostensible racial difference reemerges periodically throughout the text. Thus, literary passing is never absolute. (13, italics in original)

One could argue that passing is also never absolute in real life since the passer is unable to rid him- or herself of the memories of the past. The exception would be those who are unaware of their passing, the second-generation passers who do not know about their parents' past – a notion explored in Bennett's novel. In works of literature concerned with slavery, readers meet light-skinned slaves trying to reach freedom in the North and passing as white on their way. "In literature of the Harlem Renaissance, the popular theme of passing featured mixed-race women entangled in the complex world of racial masquerade" (Dagbovie-Mullins 21). Although the narratives may change throughout history, they will inevitably have common aspects. Brooke Kroeger observed that "[d]espite the different plot twists, the moral in each version of the story is the same. Passing, if not altogether bad, is at least a really bad idea, and society, or life itself, will punish the 'passer' for breaking the rules" (2). The punishment may vary from being caught and facing the consequences of the act, through the emotional turmoil of continuous passing, to even tragic death, as Nella Larsen's *Passing* illustrates.

Simply a cursory look at African American literature reveals that the concept of racial passing is not new. Although in African American literature racial passing is illustrated as early as in the first slave narratives, the time period in which the examples abound is

the 1900s. Some notable examples are Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), and George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931). Racial passing as a theme is not limited to works of black authors, which is visible, for example, in Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1933) or Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998). What differentiates Bennett's novel from numerous others, however, is the fact that she gives voice to generations who must live with the consequences of the passing of their family members. She also introduces a subplot concerning gender passing, which was often intertwined with racial passing. Bennett, however, separates the two not only through the use of different characters but also by separating the different types of passing by decades. Although gender passing is not the main thread of the plot, it becomes significant to the life of one of the main characters. Perhaps the author wanted to illustrate the fact that yearning to become someone else did not only concern race, even in the past.

*The Vanishing Half*, set between the 1960s and 1980s, focuses on the story of twin sisters, one, to use DuBois' phrasing, living as 'an American' and the other 'as a Negro'. Stella and Desiree Vignes spent their childhood and part of their adolescence in Mallard – a small southern town founded by their ancestor and inhabited by African Americans with very light complexion. Mallard, since its founding, was supposed to be a safe haven for mixed race African Americans. Alphonse Decuir was himself a light-skinned black man, whose complexion became his burden, separating him from other black people, and thus he dreamed of Mallard: "A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes. A third place" (Bennett 6). The concept of such a town was difficult to grasp for outsiders:

> Colored people whispered about it, wondered about it. White people couldn't believe it even existed. When St. Catherine's was built in 1938, the diocese sent over a young priest from Dublin who arrived certain that he was lost. Didn't the bishop tell him that Mallard was a colored town? Well, who were these people walking about? Fair and blonde and redheaded, the darkest ones no swarthier than a Greek? Was this who counted for colored in America, who whites wanted to keep separate? Well, how could they even tell the difference? (Bennett 6)

Mallard was a town filled with people who could easily pass for white but did not. Within their town they were themselves: neither white nor black, neither superior nor inferior because of their skin color. The reaction of the priest is illustrative of the race problem in America; although the differences may be invisible, they were present and felt. The last question of the quote is also illustrative of the difficulty in recognizing racial passers solely on their looks. Mallard is symbolic of the color line existing in American society. On either side mixed-race African Americans are pigeonholed into identity categories

that are not suitable for them; they belong only on the color line in places like Mallard. However, just as the color line is a concept, in the novel Mallard also does not officially exist. Although everyone knew about it and recognized it, with progress and changing times even Mallard, like the concept of the color line, was altered, as it could no longer exist in the state of in-between. "By 1981, Mallard no longer existed, or at least, it was no longer Mallard. The town had never actually been a town at all. .... And although the residents may have created their own boundaries, a place has no legal borders. .... Mallard had always been more of an idea than a place, and an idea couldn't be redefined by geographical terms" (Bennett 323). Similarly to race and identity, which elude precise definitions, Mallard was for the longest time an undefined place, and just like the mentioned terms people knew about it and created its borders, recognized by many without any official statements.

Stella and Desiree grew up in Mallard, but they always resented the place and the responsibilities it meant for them as the founding family. What is more, despite the notion that Mallard could be considered a safe haven for light-skinned African Americans when their identity was concerned, it could not protect them from white violence. The twins' father was attacked in his home and later killed, and the girls witnessed it. The traumatic experience could also be the reason why the twins wanted to escape the town, but what really seemed to prompt their escape was the fact that Mallard presented them with a life in which neither Stella nor Desiree saw themselves happy, a life of working for whites as their help. Therefore, in 1968, at the age of sixteen, under cover of the night they left Mallard for New Orleans.

Leaving Mallard meant that the girls left a place in which their race constricted them in regard to opportunities but allowed them not to stand out as 'the other' among other black people due to their lightness. New Orleans was a place where Stella and Desiree were anonymous and could define themselves, unlike in Mallard where they were known from birth as the Vignes twins: always considered together and playing the pre-assigned role of the founding family. For the first time in their lives the girls had a chance to see themselves as individuals.

Stella's racial passing in New Orleans was Desiree's idea. When the twins lost their jobs Desiree prompted her sister to apply for a position as a secretary. "An office like that would never hire a colored girl, but they needed the money, living in the city and all, and why should the twins starve because Stella, perfectly capable of typing, became unfit as soon as anyone learned she was colored? It wasn't lying, she told Stella. How was it her fault if they thought she was white when they hired her?" (Bennett 65) Just like so many other African Americans, material needs led to Stella's passing. Desiree's justification of the act points to the notion that Stella was apprehensive and needed to be convinced that the act was not something to feel guilty about. Although it was more in Desiree's nature to fool the people around her, she did not possess the skills needed for the job and

thus it was Stella who was to become white at work, to pass part-time. Despite Desiree's assurances about how easy and profitable passing would be, Stella saw it from a different perspective. She saw her own possible vulnerabilities: "If she was hired, she would have to be white every day, and if she couldn't sit in this waiting room without her hands shaking, how could she ever manage that?" (Bennett 195) Despite her apprehension, when Stella was hired she listened to her sister and treated her passing as acting, so at that time she did not alter her identity but performed a role during her working hours, as if playing the role of a young white woman was part of her job description.

> At work Stella became Miss Vignes or, as Desiree called her, White Stella. Desiree always giggled after, as if she found the very idea preposterous, which irritated Stella. She wanted Desiree to see how convincingly she played her role, but she was living a performance where there could be no audience. Only a person who knew her real identity would appreciate her acting, and nobody at work could ever know. At the same time, Desiree could never meet Miss Vignes. Stella could only be her when Desiree was not around. In the morning, during her ride to Maison Blanche, she closed her eyes and slowly became her. She imagined another life, another past. .... She let her mind go blank, her whole life vanishing until she became new and clean as a baby. (Bennett 197)

The description of Stella's process of becoming Miss Vignes seems similar to an actor preparing for a role, but as Stella herself notes, she is acting for no audience, so at what point does acting become lying? Desiree seems to have treated her sister's passing as a game, something funny, but what is she laughing at? At the naivety of white people, or at her sister's new identity? Stella's irritation with Desiree's attitude shows that she did not treat passing as a game. The gravity of the situation in which she put herself every day never seemed to escape her. The part-time passing included forgetting about her family and her past for the better part of the week, which means that even though she was passing only part-time, she spent more time assuming her new identity than being herself. Stella's preparations to become Miss Vignes resemble a complete erasure of her current identity and the creation of a new one; however, this seems impossible because she had to maintain certain facts that she shared with others while passing. Her identity transformation during the part-time passing could be seen as transgressing a line in the sand that she imagined separated her two identities. The line is vital because it needs to divide the aspects of identity which would identify a person as African American or white, but it is not an impermeable line because Stella's personality does not change; she is who she always has been personality-wise; only her background and racial association have changed.

It seems that at some point Stella no longer assumed her second identity but permanently possessed two identities. Miss Vignes stopped emerging only during her working

hours and became a feature of Stella's private life. "She didn't like to think about Miss Vignes when she wasn't her, although, sometimes, the other girl appeared suddenly, the way you might think about an old friend" (Bennett 199). With those appearances, Stella comes to wonder whether the role of Miss Vignes is a role or a long-hidden part of her identity: "Sometimes she wondered if Miss Vignes was a separate person altogether. Maybe she wasn't a mask Stella put on. Maybe Miss Vignes was already a part of her, as if she had been split in half. She could be whichever woman she decided, whichever side of her face she tilted to the light" (Bennett 199). The idea of splitting into two separate halves seems to exemplify the nature of mixed-race African Americans: half white and half black, and some being able to move from one side of the color line to the other with ease. Possessing two identities, however, could also be seen as dissociative identity disorder, but whereas in the disorder one has no control over which identity they assume at any given point, Stella could choose which identity she presented to the world, a practice characteristic of racial passers. Although Stella hints at her power over the choice of her identities, the intrusions of the identity of Miss Vignes point to the fact that she either did not have the process under control or that she preferred to be Miss Vignes, and that the positive feelings that accompanied the identity made her want to be the white secretary more than the black Stella. The time spent as a white woman combined with the treatment she received led to a change in her. The Stella of the past became more of a memory and a new Stella was born – a woman who needed things she could have only if she was white.

Despite all of the material gains that Stella's passing brought her, the decision to pass permanently was based on emotions. She fell in love with a white man, and the only way to be with him was to sever her ties with her past – which included her sister.

> "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. She didn't give herself a chance to second-guess. .... 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. The rest was only logistics. (Bennett 208)

Despite her initial apprehensions about passing for work, Stella fit very well in the world of white people. Perhaps this was due to her personality and the fact she was raised in Mallard, that she does not feel out of place, that moving through the color line does not change anything significant about her. What is more, readers learn that her racial passing in New Orleans was not her first time passing as white. When she was a child, she accidentally passed for white when she entered a shop, and became very discontented with the notion that passing, even though she did not do it purposefully, was perceived as something wrong. She could not understand then that there was an imaginary line

separating American society. Even though individuals may look similar, their heritage decides whether they are white or black, whether they are privileged or disadvantaged. This notion that Stella had already passed in the past, although briefly, hints at the fact that for her being perceived as white was not a new concept and perhaps came more easily than explaining that despite her looks she was classified as black or that for Stella race was not an essential part of her identity.

Having passed permanently, Stella learnt that with it came unexpected emotional consequences. The fear of discovery was constant, and it was made stronger by the fact that she had once already been caught: "Did she look as nervous as she felt? Would anybody be able to tell? A colored family in the neighborhood. .... She tried to steady the flutter in her stomach but she couldn't. She'd been caught before. Only once, the second time she'd ever pretended to be white" (Bennett 155). Tomkins observed that fear aids in shaping the avoidance behavior which was common for racial passers. The permanent state of fear led Stella to avoid other black people, and she masked her fear with contempt, a common affect applied in the social hierarchy "in order to maintain distance between individuals, classes and nations" (Tomkins 363). Her derision towards black people became part of her new identity; it was a protective mechanism to distance herself from those who could reveal her secret; however, its intensity was sometimes so striking that it did not pass unnoticed by her husband. It seems that in times of strong fear Stella's contempt became heightened.

Not only were contempt and fear her constant companions, but also her lying became second nature. Questions about her past and family became more frequent as her daughter Kennedy grew older and was curious about her mother's side of family. When Kennedy was very small, Stella shared a fact about her past with Kennedy because she thought it was safe to tell it to a small child: "She'd been, for the first and final time, completely honest with her daughter, only because she knew the girl was too young to remember. Later, Stella would lie" (Bennett 158). Sharing information about the past must have been very hard, especially because those moments were only a brief reprieve from lying, and the emotions they must have awakened could linger. Talking about her past also meant altering the facts because most of her memories involved Desiree, who Stella told everyone had died. Thus, what she told others was a balancing act between truth and lies, managing not to cross the boundary between reality and fantasy too often. Stella herself admitted that those difficulties were linked to her lack of friends. She observed: "A lonely past, a lonely present" (Bennett 183). Passing was in fact a lonely process; one could never completely share their whole selves with others if they wanted to maintain their new identities.

When Desiree talked about Stella's possible return to the family she said: "Even if she comes back. She's already gone" (Bennett 103). This emphasizes the change in Stella's identity. Even if she were to return to live in Mallard, she would not be the same person.

Stella frequently thinks about her racial identity. It seems that passing does not allow a person to treat it as an inconsequential part of their individual identity; it is always at the forefront. Long-term passing had its impact: "Stella had lived white for half her life now, and maybe acting for that long ceased to be acting altogether. Maybe pretending to be white eventually made it so" (Bennett 74). The fact that Stella is unsure of her racial identity emphasizes the notion that one does not completely control their own identity, that they are affected by how society perceives them and by the marks the past has left on them. One could also argue that, for some individuals, abandoned racial identity and past life can be like an amputated limb – they are aware of it, once it was a part of them, but they have now learned to live without it. However, for some, phantom limb syndrome occurs; the missing part reminds individuals about itself in a painful way: for limbs the pain manifests physically, but for missing identity it can be intense fear, sadness, loneliness, or guilt – emotional pain. For Stella, this seems to occur whenever she is faced with reminders of the life she abandoned: when a black family moves across the street and her initial fear transforms into a longing for real interpersonal connections, and guilt for hiding her relationship with the black neighbor from her white acquaintances and even her own husband, or when Jude, Desiree's daughter, confronts her and she feels her current way of life is being threatened. Whenever such situations occur Stella reacts with contempt towards individuals in order to distance herself and suppress the emotional pain.

Stella is only one of the twins but it seems that her racial passing is what triggers all of what later happens within her family. One could also assume that the title refers to her—the "vanishing half"—the twin that vanished without a trace or the part of identity that vanishes once an individual decides to pass. The other half and the other twin is Desiree, who is suddenly left all alone in New Orleans when Stella leaves the city with Blake and disappears leaving behind only a note. Desiree deeply grieves Stella abandoning her. She seems lost without her sister, as if Stella was a part of whom Desiree was—without her she has to redefine herself so she attempts to leave her misery behind her. "In D.C., she tried to bury her grief. …. Desiree told herself that she was starting over but she thought of Stella even more now, wondering what she would make of this city. She'd left New Orleans to escape the memory of her but she still couldn't fall asleep without rolling over to feel for Stella in bed beside her" (Bennett 19–20). For a long time Desiree could not escape the feeling of loss, but eventually she learned to live without Stella's presence—a presence that for most of Desiree's life had a significant impact on shaping who she was. What helped Desiree to redefine herself was a new job and falling in love with Sam, who became her husband and abuser.

Desiree's relationship with Sam would not have been easily accepted in Mallard; it clashed with everything that the town stood for because Sam was a dark-skinned African American. The town's reaction to Desiree's choice of husband is visible once she returns

to Mallard with her child. “In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either, but Desiree had already done that. Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far” (Bennett 5). One could postulate that Desiree’s choice could have been influenced by trying to do the opposite of what was expected of her in her hometown – after all, she had escaped it partly due to the burden of those expectations—or to do the opposite of what Stella did, which was to fall in love with a white man. Desiree’s mother has her own view of why Sam married Desiree, and her assumptions point to the reasons for Sam’s abuse. The mother perceives it in the following manner: “A dark man would trample her beauty. He’d love it at first but like anything he desired and could never attain, he would soon grow to resent it. Now he was punishing her for it” (Bennett 39). The mother’s concerns prove to be valid, but one could wonder how the mother knows to expect what happened. Perhaps her assumptions are based on personal experiences that are not revealed, or she uses the racial history of the United States as the precursor of her daughter’s relationship.

The mother’s assumptions come true when Sam starts abusing Desiree. At times, Desiree attempts to justify his violence by blaming it on herself whenever she said something that triggered him, and on the violence and prejudice against colored people. “She’d wounded him while he was still grieving. [Martin Luther King Jr.’s death] .... Who could blame him, living in a world that refused to respect him as a man? She didn’t have to be so mouthy” (Bennett 28). Desiree tries to paint the abuser as a victim of the social circumstances, but she exists in the same reality. Her justifications referring to the racial situation in the US should also refer to her own sense of identity, her not being treated as equal, but she does not refer to that because even when she lives in a black community she is mistaken for white by other black people; it seems that she does not share the same racial identity as Sam. Sam, like white Stella towards black people, exhibits contempt to express his racial superiority over Desiree due to the difference in their skin pigmentation. Whereas Stella’s contempt was supposed to prove her whiteness, Sam’s contempt shows his pride in being black, his superior racial identity over Desiree’s mulatto status. His feelings of superiority lead to outbursts of anger whenever Desiree is, in his view, not adequately emphasizing her inferiority. He may even be disgusted with her because, as Tomkins claims, disgust is “the response of disenchantment” (395), and Sam becomes disenchanted with Desiree’s light skin, which becomes a point of contempt despite it having been insignificant earlier. When Sam becomes violent, Desiree’s light complexion becomes the target of his verbal abuse: “his hands curled into fists, before he called her *uppity yellow bitch* or *crazy as your sister* or *off thinkin you white*” (Bennett 23, italics in the original). Sam’s behavior seems to point to the notion that a light-skinned African American could never be treated the same by other black people as someone dark-skinned, that they do not have the same racial identity because their suffering would never be as deep and their escape across the color line too easy. It seems that contempt

was part of the lives of light-skinned African Americans no matter if they transgressed the color line or not: they either exhibit it or are at its receiving end. Because of Sam's abuse, Desiree goes back to Mallard where she is no longer too light, but her daughter now faces the challenge of being too black in a town inhabited by African Americans.

Whereas Stella's choice to pass as white and separate herself from her family directly impacted her and her sister, its impact on the next generation is indirect and the result of the choices the twins made after Stella's passing. Jude's life was impacted by her family racial background twofold. First, her own unusually dark complexion was the reason for how her grandmother and the community in Mallard treated her, and it thus affected her identity development. Second, Stella's absence from Desiree and Jude's life created a hole in the family that Jude was desperate to fill. She felt the need to know her aunt who chose to live as a white woman, who escaped Mallard for good, something of which Jude also dreamed.

Living in Mallard proved challenging for Jude. From her arrival in early childhood to her leaving in adolescence she was stigmatized due to her blackness. Mallard was a community that did not easily accept dark-skinned people:

> They weren't used to having a dark child amongst them and were surprised by how much it upset them. Each time that girl passed by, no hat or nothing, they were galled as when Thomas Richard returned from the war, half a leg lighter, and walked around town with one pant leg pinned back so that everyone could see his loss. If nothing could be done about ugliness, you ought to at least look like you were trying to hide it. (Bennett 69)

Citizens of Mallard saw Jude's blackness as a type of impairment, as the above quote points to. Erving Goffman notes that among different types of stigmas there is that which is highly visible but not intrusive. (49) One could assume that Jude's skin color would be classified as such because although everyone noticed it, she is no different than any other girl in Mallard in other aspects. However, the treatment she received due to her blackness seemed to impair her ability to live fully in the small town, to have friends, to find love, to shape her identity without the constant negative impact of others stigmatizing her looks. That stigmatization took different forms, from exclusion from daily activities all the other children partook in, to verbal ridicule, which stayed with her long after she left Mallard: "They made up lots of jokes, and once, well into her forties, she would recite a litany of them at a dinner party in San Francisco" (Bennett 88). The fact that she remembered all the jokes so long after being bullied suggests their lasting impact on her, but the openness with which she seems to refer to them, as an anecdote at a party, shows that although they are part of her identity, they are not one of its defining elements.

It was not only the community which influenced Jude's self-worth and perception but also her grandma, who attempted to make her complexion lighter. She "tried to keep her

[Jude] out of the sun" but those attempts did not bring the desired result. (Bennett 88) All that treatment made Jude uncomfortable in her skin and desperate to change, as she would look for ways to become at least a little less dark: "She tried to lighten her skin once, ... She wasn't foolish enough to hope that someday she might be light, but a deep brown maybe, anything better than this endless black" (Bennett 110). Her need to fit in was met with understanding from her grandmother, who attempted to help with different kinds of beauty potions but to no avail. Her mother's attitude towards Jude's feelings and her stigmatization leaned towards advice about ignoring others' attitudes and being herself. It seems peculiar that Desiree did not show more understanding towards her daughter's struggles when she herself had experienced verbal abuse from Sam for being too light-skinned.

Tomkins wrote that a vital part of a child's development is the process of identification. "By identification we mean the wish to be like someone else in some or all respects, for example, to think as the other does, to act as he does, to feel as he does, to look as he looks, and so on" (Tomkins 244). It seems then that Jude's need to look more like others in Mallard, and especially her mother, may not have been linked strictly with wanting to avoid stigmatization, but had also been a normal part of a child's development, which was to a degree impaired due to the lack of individuals who looked like Jude. Other children commented on the lack of resemblance between Jude and Desiree, and at some point Jude began providing fictitious answers that would halt the unwanted questions. "'We don't believe you,' Louisa said. 'About that bein your mama. She too pretty to be your mama.' 'She's not,' Jude said. 'My real mama's somewhere else.' 'Where at?' 'I don't know. Somewhere. I haven't found her yet.' She was thinking, somehow, of Stella – a woman who resembled her just a little but would be a better version of her mother" (Bennett 92). It is interesting that Jude would choose Stella as the alternative to her mother. Desiree and Stella are almost identical twins, so if someone claims that Jude does not resemble Desiree, she also does not look like Stella. Nevertheless, this does not prevent Jude from forming an emotional connection to the aunt whom she never met.

Due to the lack of an individual who she could identify with, Jude selected a missing member of the family she could mold to her liking in her imagination and imitate the way she thought Stella would behave. The need to be part of the unit was important to Jude even before she arrived in Mallard. When her father told her that Desiree thought herself better than them due to her skin color and background, Jude thought: "She didn't understand exactly what he meant, but she liked being part of an us. People thought that being one of a kind made you special. No, it just made you lonely. What was special was belonging with someone else" (Bennett 92–93). The need to be a part of the group, part of a collective identity, seems natural, but Jude was deprived of this opportunity for most of her life, always too dark to fit with others in Mallard and later marred with the past stigmatization and thus skeptical of creating new bonds. The fact that being "one of

a kind" made her lonely links her to Stella, who, due to concealing her real racial identity, was also lonely. The same feeling caused by racial identity but a contrasting source: one could not hide or change her race and the other could not reveal it. No wonder then that Stella became a haunting presence in Jude's life. "For years, Stella drifted through her dreams. .... Always Stella, never her mother, as if, even asleep, she could tell the difference. .... she imagined bumping into her. .... Stella everywhere, always, and nowhere at the same time" (Bennett 222, 224). This haunting presence could have had an emotional impact on Jude and might have, to some extent, influenced Jude's decision to move away and stay away from Mallard. Stella was a ghostly presence in Jude's life; thus, it is not surprising that when an opportunity arose to meet the ever-absent aunt, Jude seized it.

When Jude meets Kennedy, Stella's daughter, it finally affords her an opportunity to find her aunt. The reunion, however, is not a pleasant one:

> She'd met Stella but Stella didn't want to know her. It shouldn't have been surprising. She hadn't wanted anything to do with the family for decades, so nothing had changed. But why did Jude feel as if she'd lost someone? Again she saw herself reaching toward Stella, Stella pushing her away. She felt as if she'd reached for her mother and only felt her shove her back. (Bennett 267)

Stella's rejection seems to have its source in her fear of her passing coming to light. For Jude, whose dream finally comes true, the rejection is like severing another link to her family. She could not identify with other members of the Vignes family and Stella rejected her, thus she was all alone once again, no common collective identity to share. Tomkins states: "Individuation and achievement of identity require that the individual tolerate his loneliness, his aloneness and his uniqueness" (457). It seems then that Stella's rejection might have brought Jude towards shaping her own identity, and with Reese's (a transsexual man with whom she fell in love) unyielding support she was finally able to accept her differences, to admit that what was stigmatized in Mallard does not make her worse than others but simply is a part of her.

Kennedy also seems to suffer from an inadequate model for identification, not because Stella does not look like her but because her mother refuses to share any personal details about herself. This lack of details is the result of Stella's racial passing and her fear of her daughter's reaction if the truth were to come out: "She [Kennedy] was white; she would never think of herself as anything else. If she ever learned the truth, she would hate her mother for deceiving her" (Bennett 184). The mentioned possible hatred is one of the reasons for Stella's never-ending lies, which lead to the deterioration of the mother-daughter relationship between her and Kennedy. Kennedy eventually learns her mother's secret and that brings a crisis of identity, but she is unable to define herself even earlier. "'Why can't you just be yourself?' Stella asked once. 'Maybe I don't know who that is,' her daughter

shot back. .... Maybe something in the girl was unsettled, a small part of her realizing that her life wasn't right. As if she'd gotten older and started touching the trees, only to find that they were all cardboard sets" (Bennett 240). Kennedy's identity problems do not have a clear racial connection as she never knew herself as anything other than white. Her problems seem to be rooted in her mother's secrets and the manner in which she behaves due to them, an issue that is linked with racial identity.

For Kennedy the only element of life that is artificial is her mother's past and her own racial past. Unaware of the fact, Kennedy is passing as white. Although she never shed any part of her racial identity, her mother's actions led to her identity confusion and later her racial ambivalence. It seems that although she is oblivious of the truth, she feels that part of her identity is missing. Finding out about her mother's passing and that she has black family members does not aid Kennedy with shaping a coherent sense of identity. Initially, she could not believe it to be possible: "She would know, she decided. You couldn't go through your whole life not knowing something so fundamental about yourself. She would feel it somehow. She would see it in the faces of other blacks, some sort of connection" (Bennett 291–292). Kennedy's musings point to the notion that racial identity is something internal, but the fact that once she learns about her racial background, she does not feel any different points to the notion of racial identity being a social construct—she was treated as white and behaved as white her whole life, therefore she is white. The missing piece of identity she is constantly searching for may be interpreted as the missing racial heritage. Still, it could also be the connection to her mother that is missing, caused by racial passing but not connected to race as much as to emotional distancing.

Kennedy feels she has the right to decide on her racial or otherwise identity. When Jude points out that Kennedy is a Negro because her mother is one, Kennedy does not think about her identity in the same terms as it is defined by law or perceived by society at the time.

> It wasn't a race thing. She just hated the idea of anyone telling her who she had to be. She was like her mother in that way. If she'd been born black, she would have been perfectly happy about it. But she wasn't and who was Jude to tell her that she was somebody that she was not? Nothing had changed, really. .... A single detail had been moved and replaced. Swapping out one brick wouldn't change a house into a fire station. She was still herself. (Bennett 315)

The metaphor of one brick can refer to the one-drop rule, which defined the race of individuals in the United States for centuries. Kennedy's denial of the rule suggests that one should not be determined by the past. Only one's life and choices should define their identity, and one should be able to decide to which collective identity one ascribes; no one

else can do that for an individual. Stella's secret coming to light does not help Kennedy define herself. Kennedy continues to search for her identity, trying out new ones while she travels: "All the stories she knew were fiction, so she began to create new ones. .... She was white, she was black, she became a new person as soon as she crossed a border. She was always inventing her life" (Bennett 317). Assuming new identities does not help Kennedy forge one she is entirely comfortable with, and she never seems completely happy with herself.

The story of the Vignes twins seems to show that shaping one's identity hinges upon many aspects of one's life. Being mixed race, as well as the phenomenon of racial passing, seems to complicate the forming of one's identity because the choice of whether to transgress the color line was a decision that had far-reaching consequences, and not only for the individual who infringed the existing racial order. In the novel, Stella's racial passing not only creates emotional problems she must live with but also impacts her relationship with her whole family, no matter if they know she is passing or not. Her transgressing the color line also influences the shaping of her daughter's identity, something that Kennedy cannot fix herself no matter how hard she tries. Racial identity is also shown as highly variable within the same racial minority: the shades of black are shown to matter, as Desiree and Jude's stories illustrate. Racial passing disturbed the coherence of identity for numerous Americans in the past. As Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* shows, those who do not identify as part of a minority may belong to one. With individuals redefining themselves, the concept of national collective identity is also constantly changing. The story illustrates how the choices of one's ancestors affect the development of one's identity. Still, it demonstrates that despite many disadvantages, people can reclaim their lives and choose who they identify as. However, as illustrated, that choice does not always change how one feels or lives. Kennedy decided to keep identifying as white despite knowing her mother's heritage and society's view of racial identity. That choice, however, did not aid her in finding the missing identity she was always seeking. On the other hand, Desiree exemplifies the idea that one can find happiness outside racial identity struggles. Once Desiree returns to Mallard, she remains there for almost twenty years. Having discarded all the preconceived notions of who others saw her as, Desiree is finally content with who she becomes, finding herself in small-town life and her role as a mother, a life in which race does not play a significant role. Even when she leaves Mallard, she does not concern herself with the racial issues and continues to be content with herself and her life. Unlike in many stories, the individual who trespasses onto the territory of the racial other is not directly "punished." Instead, the price in Bennett's book seems to concern the identity problems of the next generation. The physical violence linked to race is reserved for those who do not transgress the color line: the father of the Vignes twins or Desiree. That can illustrate that racial violence is unprovoked, and the anger exhibited by the perpetrators may not be personal but built upon preconceived notions

concerning race. For example, in Desiree's situation, this notion would be how dark an African American should be to be perceived as part of the black community. Moreover, the fact that the Vignes bloodline ends, as neither Jude nor Kennedy have children, might metaphorically illustrate that racial identity is vital to maintaining families, especially if one considers Kennedy's character. For the contemporary reader, the story also illustrates what a privilege it is to live in times when one's identity—racial or otherwise—is beginning to be seen as a personal matter and not dictated by law or society.

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