Brit Bennett Reimagines the Literature of Passing

In her second novel, the author uses a familiar genre to explore startling visions of selfhood.

By Sarah Resnick

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In "The Vanishing Half," the story of two sisters divided by the color line yields new models of identity and authenticity.

In 1954, a pair of identical twins—creamy skin, hazel eyes, wavy hair—flee a small town in Louisiana and the narrow future it affords: nothing but more of the same. Desiree and Stella Vignes are sixteen and headed to New Orleans. They scrape by for a while, and eventually Stella applies for a position as a secretary at a fancy department store, a job only white girls get. She doesn't mention she's black, and no one asks. She's apprehensive—has she done something wrong?—but her sister is adamant: why should the two of them starve "when Stella, perfectly capable of typing, became unfit as soon as anyone learned that she was colored?" Stella gets the job. Every morning, on the ride to the office, she transforms into her double, Miss Vignes—"White Stella," as Desiree calls her—and every night she undergoes the process in reverse. It's "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." For a while, the twins are brought together by the joint pleasure of pulling off the performance. But gradually the gap between them widens: "Desiree could never meet Miss Vignes. Stella could only be her when Desiree was not around." One day, Stella disappears, leaving her sister a note: "Sorry honey, but I've got to go my own way."

"The Vanishing Half" (Riverhead), the second novel by Brit Bennett, tells the story of the Vignes sisters' diverging paths. In doing so, it belongs to a long tradition of literature about racial passing. From the antebellum period until the end of Jim Crow, countless black Americans crossed the color line to pass as white—to escape slavery or threats of racial violence, or to gain access to the social, political, and economic benefits conferred by whiteness. Narratives that dramatized this passage became a fixture of popular fiction, written by black and white, male and female authors alike. Charles W. Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, and Nella Larsen wrote about it, as did William Dean Howells and Kate Chopin. "Imitation of Life," the 1933 novel by Fannie Hurst, was twice made into a movie (in 1934, by John M. Stahl, and in 1959, by Douglas Sirk).

These stories repeat some version of a generic arc: the “tragic mulatto,” often a woman, chooses to leave home and pass for white; in time, anguished by the betrayal of her black identity, she returns to her family, only to be met with a harsh fate—sometimes death.

By the late twentieth century, the melodrama of these narratives—the predictable characters, the sad destinies—had mostly been cast aside. But in “The Vanishing Half” Bennett roots out these withered tropes and reanimates them in a fresh, surprising story.

The novel begins thirteen years after the lives of the Vignes twins forked. Stella lives in an upscale subdivision in Los Angeles. Desiree has returned to the town that she and her sister fled. Stella is a housewife with a maid. Desiree is a waitress at the local diner. Stella has married a man who believes she is white and who knows nothing of her past: nothing of her great-great-great-grandfather who was a slave to his own father; nothing of her father, who was lynched right in front of her. Desiree has left her husband, “the darkest man she could find,” and reunited with her first love. Both sisters have young daughters about the same age, and each has inherited her father’s features: Kennedy has blond hair and blue eyes; Jude has “blueblack” skin.

Bennett is working within not one but two genres—drawing on the well-worn elements of passing literature as well as the oft-used device of long-lost twins—and she leans into their prescribed melodrama. Her omniscient narration roves among story lines, introducing us to a cast of stock characters: Barry, the drag queen; Peg, the women’s libber; Blake, the white moderate voter; Sam, the violent patriarch; Loretta, the mother in a “respectable” black family. As Jude and Kennedy get older, they conform to types, too. Jude is a talented black athlete on scholarship at U.C.L.A., and Kennedy is a “rich bitch” living on her parents’ dime. More than once, the plot turns on an outrageous coincidence.

But, as the novel unfolds, we begin to recognize how deftly Bennett is rearranging the generic pieces of her story. Her frictionless prose whisks us across a period of nearly forty years, the plot unwinding nonsequentially, a character’s thought or action in the present rousing a story from the past. It is, to borrow an observation that Kennedy makes about how memory works, like “seeing forward and backward at the same time.” The electricity inside this space—past, present, and the stretch between—comes from watching seemingly predictable characters collide in unexpected ways.

The narrative of passing inevitably confronts questions of performance: the dissonance between the authentic self and the projected self, the drama of seeing and being seen. But, in Bennett’s novel, Stella, the archetypal passing figure, is hardly the only performer. All of Bennett’s characters wrestle with the roles they have been assigned. The vital dynamic between actor and spectator yields different models of selfhood. Is identity something you take on, or something you take apart? Something you erect, or something you expose?

Stella’s daughter, Kennedy, is an actress in the most conventional sense. At age eleven, she is cast as a Chinese railroad worker in a school play about the gold rush. She has only seven lines, but her mother helps her memorize them. Stella, who often seems

dismayed at her child's mediocrity, is suddenly encouraging. "I mean, it was completely ridiculous," Kennedy remembers, years later. "You couldn't even see my face. But my mother told me I did a good job. She was . . . I don't know, she seemed excited for once." (The dramatic irony is potent: a supposedly white child is affirmed by her secretly black mother when she "becomes" Chinese.) By the time Kennedy conjures up this scene, she is a college dropout and a wannabe Broadway star, convinced that acting is "the only thing she was good at." Kennedy, who has never felt she truly knows her mother, or is known by her, sees acting as a way out: rather than contend with her mother's mysteries, she avoids them, opting to inhabit a succession of ready-made lives. "Acting is not about being seen," one teacher tells her. It's about "becoming invisible so that only the character shone through."

The teacher articulates a theory of acting—and of being a self—that hinges on erasure. For Kennedy, the joy of acting is in trying on a new identity; being successful at it, she discovers, means concealing one's own. One night, Kennedy experiences the sensation of leaving her body onstage, and calls it the "greatest performance she would ever give."

If effacement is one model of selfhood, Bennett's novel also contains another. Many of her characters seek out an audience not to assume a fictionalized truth but to reveal an inner one. This ambition is all about exposure: we hear it in the phrase "coming out," which captures the trepidation of unveiling something vulnerable and honest. Barry, a high-school chemistry teacher during the week, becomes Bianca, a drag queen, on the weekends. He keeps his two lives separate. But, between performances, Barry "thought about [Bianca], shopped for her, planned for her eventual return"; she was always there, "lingering on the edge of his mind." Reese, one of Jude's first friends in Los Angeles, has been similarly torn between identities. He and Jude meet around Halloween, at a party, where, tellingly, each is wearing a literal disguise. She thinks Reese is cute, and finds excuses to visit him at work. Early in their friendship, which slowly becomes a romance, he tells her that he's trans. (Bennett sets this conversation in a darkroom—Reese dreams of being a professional photographer—playing with different notions of exposure.) Born in Arkansas as Therese, he ran away from home after his father caught him dressed up in a man's shirt and tie, kissing a girl. By the time Jude meets him, "no one could tell that he'd ever been her, and sometimes, he could hardly believe it either."

In some ways, Reese's story sounds uncannily like Stella's: an escape from a small town where everyone has already decided who you are; a fresh start in a city where no one knows your past. Jude herself is tripped up by these apparent similarities. When Reese asks whether she thinks about her missing aunt, Jude sounds bitter: "I mean, what kind of person just leaves her family behind?" The words are out of her mouth before she realizes that this is exactly what Reese has done.

But is it? When Reese makes the long drive from Arkansas to Los Angeles, from his old life to his new life, his becoming is described not as the perfection of a role but as the expression of a true self:

He cut his hair in Plano, hacking off inches in a truck stop bathroom with a stolen hunting knife. Outside of Abilene, he bought a blue madras shirt and a leather belt with

a silver stallion buckle. . . . In Socorro, he began wrapping his chest in a white bandage, and by Las Cruces, he'd learned to walk again, legs wide, shoulders square. He told himself that it was safer to hitchhike this way, but the truth was that he'd always been Reese. By Tucson, it was Therese who felt like a costume.

Reese is purposeful as he sheds Therese, aligning the way he self-identifies with the way he is perceived by the outside world. Stella, meanwhile, "had become white only because everyone thought she was." To herself, she admits that her performance is just that: "This life wasn't real."

But who decides what's "real," the actor or the audience? It's a tantalizing question, one that any performance exploits. In moments when we feel seen—the sort of "recognition scenes" that so much theatre turns on—reality can appear, however fleetingly, complete. In Bennett's novel, only those who accept the imperative of exposure seem to stand a chance of being seen. When Desiree leaves her marriage, her husband hires Early, a private eye, someone whose profession is to look. In one of the book's coincidental twists, he happens to be Desiree's first love. What initially sounds sinister—Early sneaking photos of her—becomes one of the novel's most poignant relationships: he watches over Desiree. Reese, too, wields a camera with care, snapping candids of Jude, even though she "felt vulnerable seeing herself through his lens." ("Finally," her grandmother says. "One good picture of you.")

Reese and Early reflect back the best versions of the women they admire. But identities can't, in the language of photography, be captured. As Jude changes—moving from one city and one dream to another—her mother is her constant audience. Not long after Jude's friendship with Reese turns into her first experience of love, she gets a phone call from her mother. "There's something different about you," Desiree says. Jude plays dumb. "Ma'am?" she replies:

"Oh, don't ma'am me. You heard what I said. There's somethin different. I can hear it in your voice."

"Mama, there's nothing wrong with my voice."

"Not wrong. Different. You think I can't tell?"

Desiree sees through her daughter's show, but her act of exposure is an act of love. What's more, she sees what her daughter has not fully acknowledged herself, what is both painful and joyful to accept: Jude is becoming someone new.