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*Brno studies in English.* 2025, vol. 50, iss. 2, pp. 193-206

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2024-2-9
Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.82133

# Destabilizing Black/White and Male/Female Binary Systems in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

*Brno Studies in English*
Volume 50, No. 2, 2024

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867
https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2024-2-9

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**Abstract**
This qualitative study, based on content analysis within the theoretical frameworks of Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda's racial performativity and Judith Butler's undoing gender, locates destabilization of black/white and male/female binary systems in Brit Bennett's novel, *The Vanishing Half*. The constructedness of race and gender are reduced to a form of individual choice and floating signifiers. That racial and gender interpellation undergo a radical transfiguration in the novel is the central argument of this paper. A univocal political signification of the binary systems and the power relation in which it is determined and mobilized turn into an equivocal and fluctuating or fluid signification. The conceptualization and construction of racially and sexually differentiated bodies cease to be predetermined, thereby falsifying that very construction. Through Stella, Reese, and Barry's performances, the novelist shows how the binary systems are destabilized.

**Key words**
*Whiteness performance; gender performativity; racial performativity; undoing gender; transgender*

## Introduction

The study argues, existence of race and gender finds materiality only in performativity which can demonstrate stability or instability. Stella and Desiree, identical twins, lead lives differentiated only through their individual choices and reiterated performative accomplishments. Bennett's dexterous use of the juxtaposition of daily performances of Stella and Reese, Stella's racial passing and Reese's gender passing, and Barry's drag performances (oscillating between s/he) or intermittent/discontinuous gender identities effectively disrupts the stability of race and gender and substantiates the fluidity of race and gender.

Narratives of passing ranging from Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Passing of Grandison" (1899), *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912)*, Jessie Redmon Faucet's *Plum Bun (1928)*, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956),

Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006), Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) to Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) (henceforth *Vanishing Half*) continue to spark critical interest in writers up to now.

In "Intricateness of Identity and Race: A Racist Study of Brit Bennet's Novel *The Vanishing Half,*" Akbar et al aim to unveil racial prejudice by applying Frantz Fanon's theory. Their paper investigates how Bennett presents racial prejudice and discrimination which affects characters' past and present identities. They examine how Stella escapes from racial prejudice and reshapes her new identity as a "White Passing" (2021: 350–360). The very ability to pass thereby cracks the supposed unitary category, a hypothesis taken up by Nahari and Kristianto in "Construction and Re-Conception of Identity: Rejecting Homogeneity in America through *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett". Nahari and Kristianto attempt to "redefine the concept of identity in a fluid social society and to interpret the re-conception of identity as an effort to build awareness of the concept of identity as fluid, layered, changeable and diverse" (2023: 49). It also focuses on Reese's sexuality and uses Fanon's theory. Therefore, the aforementioned studies separately deploy Fanon's writing to explore race, gender, and sexuality, an application I applaud but choose not to use here. My analysis, in contrast, features objectives, theory, and findings that differ significantly from theirs. In the current study on destabilizing binary systems I rely on theoretical frameworks introduced by Miron and Inda's racial performativity and Butler's gender performativity.

Bennett's *Vanishing Half* centers on rich complexities and metaphorics of racial and gender passing as well as fluidity of race and gender performativities. The attempt to analyze the fluidity of race and gender or an undoing of these two to break the internal stability of these two political power constructs, to undo one's gender, and to claim sexuality of one's choice, will result in opening a new vision and will enrich readers' understanding of the novel. The novel effectively challenges an existing matrix which conceptualizes and maintains arbitrary categorization of race and gender. It breaks the long-standing hierarchical construction and regulation of race and gender by a performative construction/subversion of race and gender or by a reconstruction of racial and gender performativities. It questions the so-called naturalness of white/black race and male/female gender and even deliberately dismantles that naturalness. It is a radical critique of the race and gender identities, categorizations, and specifications. It deregulates hierarchical structure, denaturalizes categories, resignifies bodily acts, and thus it produces a subversive discontinuity with regard to race and gender. Butler calls it "subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame" (*Gender Trouble* x).

Ginsberg maintains, the genealogy of 'passing' in American history associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent white identity by an individual culturally and "legally defined as black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry" (1996: 2). Passing, as Ginsberg says, metaphorically implies that an individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying "one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other" (1996: 3). Judith Butler, Werner Sollors, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., reflect on "passing as a literary device, a philosophical conundrum, and a his-

torical phenomenon" (Bennet 2001: 206). Ginsberg calls passing a trope and a practice. Passing itself alludes to the fact that identities are performative rather than constitutive and concurrently bespeaks of contingent identities of individuals. It transgresses against existing identity politics and creates one's own identity beyond the system. Passing exposes politicizations intrinsic to constructions and specifications of race and gender and broadens the debates on identity politics. Paradigms of passing might be permanent, brief, situational, or intermittent.

## Racial & Gender Performativities, & Undoing Performativities: An Overview

Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda argue that race is a reiterated enactment of norms that retroactively constructs the appearance of race as a static essence. That being the case, race, rather than a biological truth, is a performative that in the act of uttering brings into being that which it names. "It resolutely does not refer to a preconstituted subject. It is simply a name that retroactively constitutes and naturalizes the groupings to which it refers. Race, in other words, works performatively to constitute the racial subject itself, a subject that only procures a naturalized effect through repeated reference to that subject" (2000: 99). Thus, what might be called racial performativity is not a singular act of racial subject constitution, but a reiterative practice through which discourse brings about the effect that it names (Miron and Inda 2000: 99). Race as a performative reiteration is produced and maintained through a continued interpellation. Thus, performative acts destabilize and threaten the stability and immutability of race. This could be called undoing racial performativity.

Juxtaposition of Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda's theory of racial performativity and Butler's theory of gender performativity can concomitantly enrich readers' understanding of political paradigms of race and gender as performative reiterations. Significantly, as Butler says, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment (1988: 520). The way racial and gender performativities make the dynamics of significations explicit or visible in the performances of individuals, be it black/white or male/female, just the same way, undoing racial and gender performativities manifest in individuals' performances.

Butler in *Undoing Gender* argues that gender is an incessant activity which is performed. She maintains that gender is "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (2004: 1). On that account, gender conceives a diametrically opposite posture. If gender is a kind of doing or if gender can be performed, it also means that one can undo one's gender. This undoing is deliberate and instrumental in that it goes against existing power regulation and makes the concept and doing of gender fluid, rather than fixed. If racial performativity means "reiterating the norms through which a racial subject is constituted" (Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda 2000: 100), breaking the norms, by which racial subject is determined and maintained, could go by the name of undoing racial performativity. Hence, doing racial and gender performativities is constructed and understood alongside perceptions of undoing racial and gender performativities.

## Nonlinearity, Instability, & Terrains of Blackness/Whiteness

An overall discontinuity in the nonlinear narrative structure of Bennett's *Vanishing Half* finds better expression in the discontinuity of time (by means of using flashback technique) fluidly and frequently moving between the past and present from the 1950s to the late 1990s from Mallard to New Orleans, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, New York, and Minneapolis. Such nonlinearity or changeability in the geographical map is shown in the case of Mallard (founded in 1848 by Alphonse Decuir) which is no longer called Mallard, but is now a part of Palmetto in 1986. This nonlinearity, a central motif, follows reiterations throughout the novel to form a pattern both in the case of thematic and stylistic levels. The pattern witnesses a juxtaposition of instability of race, gender and instability/discontinuity of time, place, and/or social milieu. "Mallard had always been more of an idea than a place, and an idea couldn't be redefined by geographical terms" (Bennett 2020: 303). Mallardians "would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes" (Bennett 10). The idea manifests itself in Mallardians' obsession with whiteness. A mutual connectedness working between Mallardians' idea of whiteness and Mallard is made explicit in the novel. "Soon idea and place became inseparable" (2020: 6).

> Decuir was a light-skinned ex-slave who built a town [Mallard] for light-skinned Black people. He had married a mulatto even lighter than himself. She was pregnant then with their first child, and he imagined his children's children's children, lighter still, like a cup of coffee steadily diluted with cream... Each generation lighter than the one before... White people couldn't believe it [Mallard] even existed... After generations, the town's population became lighter and lighter, until lightness itself became an obsession among the townspeople. In 1954 Decuir's great-great-great-granddaughters, sixteen-year-old twins Desiree Vignes and Stella Vignes, lived with their mother, Adele, in the Decuir's family home called "a white shotgun house". (Bennett 2020: 5–6)

Decuir's longing – "he imagined his children's children's children, lighter" (6) – and the materiality – "After generations, the town's population became lighter and lighter, until lightness itself became an obsession" (6) bespeak of the performative reiterations which are deliberately and purposely done through individual acts to achieve such longing. The biological process of reproduction of mixed-race lighter and more lighter-skinned children generation after generation testifies to genital consummation or acts, in other words. Reproduction undergoes modification of skin color, thereby showing constant evolution. Since whiteness is often thought to be constructed alongside the perceptions of blackness, Mallardians' marriages are preplanned according to preconceived idea of achieving lightness of skin. That being the case, "In Mallard, nobody married dark" (2020: 5) to steer clear of the breeding of black children. The pursuit of whiteness functions as a recurrent theme and a trope in the novel and shapes the thoughts of characters.

Bennett's nonlinear narrative of *Vanishing Half* unfolds the life trajectories of light-skinned Mallardian identical twin sisters, Desiree and Stella. The beautiful twins, born in 1938, live with their parents, Adele and Leon Vignes in Mallard, Louisiana in the Jim Crow South. An infuriated mob of white men lynches Leon twice on a charge of Leon's writing a nasty letter to a white woman, though Leon could not read or write. Desiree and Stella witness their father's first lynching as children, and the memory of the event leaves an indelible mark on them. Leon somehow survives the first lynching. However, the white men finds him at the hospital and shoots him dead.

> Desiree witnessed the first lynching but would forever imagine the second, how her father must have been sleeping, his head slumped, the way he nodded off in his chair after supper. How the thundering boots woke him. He screamed, or maybe had no time to, his swollen hands bandaged and useless at his sides. From the closet, she'd watched the white men drag her father out of the house, his long legs drumming against the floor. (Bennett 2020: 34)

Leon's murder leads them to poverty and the white atrocity on black people enters into the minds of the twins. Desiree is ambitious and longs to leave Mallard with a dream to be an actress in the city. Whereas Stella dreams to be a teacher at Mallard high school. They are polar opposites with regard to their line of thinking. Thinking about Adele's poverty, hardship, and isolation, Stella wants to leave the town. Adele removes the twins from the school on the last day of tenth grade and puts them to work at "a giant white house hidden behind iron gates topped with white marble lions" (2020: 11). They work as housekeepers to the wealthy white Duponts in Opelousas all summer. That same summer, Mr. Dupont rapes Stella multiple times. Stella fears that Mr. Dupont would rape her again in all probability. She does not disclose it to anyone, including her twin sister and her mother.

In a flashback, the novelist communicates this fact to the readers in part 3, chapter 7. When Desiree comes up with a plan to leave Mallard right after Founder's Day dance, Stella agrees, and they leave for New Orleans on August 14, 1954. To get rid of white oppression and penury, Stella leaves her birthplace. Both the twins share a commonality of thought, that is, to lead a better life. When the twins first arrive in New Orleans, they find work together in the mangle room at Dixie Laundry, folding sheets and pillowcases for 2 dollars a day. As Stella's earning is inadequate, she needs a new job. She responds to a listing in the newspaper for secretarial work in an office inside the Maison Blanche building. She knows that the office "would never hire a colored girl, but they [twins] 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 that she was colored" (Bennett 2020: 61)?

Bennett shows intricacies of race and identity at this point of the novel. An identity of a black girl would make her loose the job opportunity. On the contrary, an identity of a white girl would land her getting the same job. Through an

arbitrary binary construction, such as black and white, people are classified, privileged, and oppressed. It establishes "a symbolic boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable, the normal and the deviant" (Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda 2000: 97), thereby maintaining an institutionalized racism. Such an act of naturalizing differences is called racial performativity, to put it another way. Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda argue that "Race is not a fact of nature" (2000: 99) and that "the term black cannot be taken as referring to a pre-constituted entity. It must be seen, instead" (2000: 102). Accordingly, the terrains of blackness and whiteness must be seen, performed. An enactment of race is performatively done. Butler's performative theory of identity entirely denies the stability of identity. Race, gender, sexuality are constructed through the continual performance of these so-called markers. Therefore, one can continually make and remake identities. This understanding shapes Stella's thinking when she "decided to become someone else" (2020: 70) and pass for white to secure the job. Here, whiteness functions as a commodity or property as illustrated by Cheryl Clarke. Now coming back to Stella whose understanding compels her to change her performances or to do what she is expected to fulfill a certain standard of whiteness. She was light enough to pass for white, so to speak. "But what had changed about her [Stella]? Nothing, really. She hadn'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" (Bennett 188). Race is performative; it is a doing, or a performative accomplishment. This is why Stella needs no disguise, and rather she performatively accomplishes whiteness. "She [Stella] had become white because it was practical" (Bennett 2020: 225). Practicality points to probability of performativity.

## Racial Passing

Stella's performing whiteness or racial passing draws attention to destabilization of race and calls into question whiteness itself. A fundamental question does emerge thereof: If anyone can perform whiteness, what does it mean to be white? Or, if repetition of bodily or performative acts can construct a certain racial identity, what is the point to sustain arbitrary categorizations? Stella, as she has already decided to pass for white, gives a job interview for the position of secretary to a marketing executive in the Maison Blanche marketing department, the interviewer (later revealed as Blake Sanders) mistakes her as white. Now Stella's boss is Blake, a charming white man, who even asks to marry her. Stella enacts whiteness through bodily postures and gestures, disposition, pattern of speaking, style, all other required modes of communicative acts, and performative reiterations of all these embodied acts by which a new identity is constructed. The line of reasoning (much like Simone de Beauvoirian claims about gender) goes as such: Stella is not born white, but, rather, becomes a white. This is what could be called subversive performative reiterations. The argument lies in the dichotomies of white skin and performance of whiteness. Blake is born white; in contrast, Stella becomes white as her new racial identi-

ty shows itself in materiality through reiterated performative accomplishments. It partly postulates the central argument (that racial interpellation undergoes a radical transfiguration in the novel) of this paper.

The continuity of Stella's performance of whiteness exhibits in her marriage with Blake, in her performances as Blake's wife, as mother to their only daughter (Kennedy Sanders), as a neighbor to the white Lawsons and to newly arrived undesirable black neighbors, the Walkers (Reginald and Loretta Walker and their daughter, Cindy) in the wealthy Los Angeles Brentwood Neighborhood, including Stella's vexation at the entry of a black family in the Housing Association meeting, etc. Stella's conjugal life with Blake in Los Angeles is full of endearment, opulence, and comfort. Moreover, Stella is a proud mother to Kennedy (a white, blonde-haired, and blue-eyed girl). Stella is a foil to her twin sister. If Stella could pass for white, her identical twin, Desiree, could also pass for white. Desiree, however, does not do so. Either she is not at all color-concerned or she does not find any light-skinned man to marry. Instead, she marries the darkest man (Sam Winston) she could find and gives birth to a dark-skinned girl, Jude Winston. Jude is called a "Tar Baby" (83), a "Blueblack" (2020: 84) and is thought be "A fly in milk contaminating everything" (Bennett 84). Desiree leaves her abusive husband in Washington DC and returns in Mallard with Jude to live with Adele in April 1968.

Desiree gets a job at Lou's Egg House and reunites with a past lover, Early Jones, who is a bounty hunter and is hired by Sam to find Desiree. Early traces Sam who now lives in Norfolk with his new wife and three boys. A violent black man like Sam could easily calculate that three boys are more important than a dark-skinned girl like Jude. Desiree is told to give birth to another child. Jude's acceptance as a black and as a girl in that society becomes more complicated. At this point, a question emerges: If Desiree, just like Stella, could pass for white, why wouldn't she secure a life just like Stella's? Desiree might have lived a life like Stella more or less. The novelist makes the differences of the sisters' lives visible and argumentative. Thus, Stella's racial passing, reproduction of Kennedy, and, overall, luxurious life are antithetical to Desiree's reproduction of Jude and social humiliation on a regular basis. It is performativity which determines the fate of these twins as well as their daughters' fate.

A violent assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., a nonviolent and prominent leader in Civil Rights Movement, in April 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, makes the differences based on skin color acute and creates public protest and riots across the US. This uproar is also noticed in Desiree's escape from a violent husband in the same month and year and whites' including Stella's disapproval of the entry of the Walkers in the Brentwood Neighborhood. Just days after King's assassination in 1968, the US congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1968. This Act incorporates the Fair Housing Act which bans housing discrimination and ensures to all Americans equitable access to housing opportunity. The black spouses, Reginald and Loretta Walker, buy Lawsons' house in the Neighborhood, provided that they want to sue the Association for discrimination on the basis of the 1968 Housing Act. The assassination flashes across Stella's mind regarding her father's murder by an angry mob of whites. This traumatic flashback

makes her so nervous that she frequently sees her father's lynching by whites in her dreams. The point is that she constantly performs whiteness. When she is nervous around white women, she instantly hides her nervousness. These are some deliberate acts executed with motives. For instance, she vocally speaks out against Walkers' moving into their neighborhood in an emergency meeting of Homeowners' Association in the presence of the current president of the Association (Percy White) and three board members of the Association. Cath Johansen, a board member, appreciates Stella for raising her voice against the black. What matters most are her individual acts. Initially, Stella refuses to mix with the Walkers to conform to whiteness performances. She keenly observes their way of life in order not to imitate/follow their conduct in her own behavior. She even keeps Kennedy away from Cindy.

Stella's performative accomplishment of whiteness is so effective and intergenerational that Kennedy follows her mother's ways. Kennedy makes racist remarks against Cindy and inherits racism as she sees in her mother's performances. Stella hides her relationship with Loretta, as it were, as the relationship would prove to be undesirable aspect of her white personality. Vandalization of the Walkers' home, constant verbal abuse, and harassment from the community make the Walkers leave Brentwood and move to Baldwin Hills.

Stella ruminates on her biological parents' probable racial passing which could have been enacted by them if they wanted to. Stella says as follows:

> If they'd passed over, if they'd raised her [Stella] white, everything would have been different. No white men dragging her daddy from the porch. No laundry baskets filling the living room. She could have finished school, graduated top of her class. Maybe she would have ended up at a school like Yale, met Blake there proper. Maybe she could have been the type of girl his mother wanted him to marry. She could have had everything in her life now, but her father and mother and Desiree too. At first, passing seemed so simple, she couldn't understand why her parents hadn't done it. But she was young then. She hadn't realized how long it takes to become somebody else, or how lonely it can be living in a world not meant for you. (Bennett 2020: 169)

In an analogous way, Desiree's life could have been very different than the present one with Jude. Apparently, what make the differences is just Desiree and her parents' lack of doing or a set of reiterated performative or bodily acts of whiteness. Butler claims that "the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities" (1988: 521). Recognizing and materializing possibilities indicate continuities of performativities. The life trajectories of the twin sisters intersect with that of their respective daughters. Bennett intertwines the storyline of Stella and Kennedy with the storyline of Jude, her transsexual boyfriend Reese, and friend Barry by means of stage performances of Kennedy. Thus, an intersection of the storylines connects the main plot (racial passing of Stella) with the sub plot (Jude's relatedness to Desiree and her first cousin Kennedy and Jude's aforementioned friends' situational/permanent gender passing,) in *Vanishing Half*.

Passing, be it racial or gender passing, is an interlinking point and a trope in the novel. Stella's passing for white through reiterated performances of whiteness is juxtaposed to Kennedy's stage performances. Stella's social performances and Kennedy's theatrical performances (for instance, in *The Midnight Marauders* show in 1982) involve performer and audience. However, they are different in that Stella as a performer knows about her pretense, but not an audience/people around her. She plays out her role and scrutinizes the role very closely in order to fulfill the process of appropriation. On the contrary, Kennedy's audience knows that she enacts a theatrical role. Therefore, fact-based knowledge of the audience plays a significant role in anyone's performances. That is why when Jude could not help but reveal Stella's previous identity to Kennedy and later on to Desiree, Stella initially denies labeling it an accusation. If she stopped repeating her whiteness performances, Jude's claims would easily be justified. So, Stella continues her conventional performances. This is how her performativity increases racial destabilization of the black/white binary system.

## Undoing Gender

Stella's passing through performativity of whiteness (as in the main plot) and Reese and Barry's passing (as in the subplot) are interwoven to maintain a parallel structure with regard to plot and theme of the novel and to show fluidity and destabilization of racial and gender identities. Jude pursues further education and for that she hails from Mallard and arrives in Los Angeles where she attends UCLA on an athletic scholarship. There at a Halloween party, Jude meets an aspiring photographer and trans man (female to male transgender) Reese who was once Therese Anne Carter. Therese could only be found on birth certificate in the offices of Union County Public Records. "No one could tell that he'd ever been her" (Bennett 2020: 104). Intentional and reiterated performativities basically make such a difference.

As Butler contends that gender is a corporeal style, an act, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where performative itself carries the double meaning of dramatic and non-referential (1988: 521–522). From Butlerian lens, one can never be considered a body only. That one does one's body is one's doing and/or opening possibilities, as it were. It suggests that "one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well" (1988: 521). Reese hails from El Dorado, Arkansas and arrives in Los Angeles. His corporeal journey from Arkansas to California corresponds to a transition journey from female to male. Both the journeys involve his bodily efforts and acts.

> On the road from El Dorado, Therese Anne Carter became Reese. 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; the shirt he still wore, the buckle he'd pawned in El Paso when he ran out of money but mentioned still feeling

> its weight hanging at his waist. 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. How real was a person if you could shed her in a thousand miles? In Los Angeles, he found a cleaning job at a gym near UCLA, where he met body builders who told him where to get the good stuff. At Muscle Beach, he lingered on the edge of the crowd as men bulging out of tank tops preened under the afternoon sun. (Bennett 2020: 103)

Reese changes his wardrobe, hairstyle and does everything to look and to act like a man. He adjusts the way he walks and begins covering his breasts with bandages. He, accompanied by Jude, works hard to buy expensive testosterone injections to suppress estrogen and progesterone levels, prevent feminization, and to produce masculinization in his body for 7 years. His transmasculine hormone therapy, also called gender affirming therapy, helps to develop desired sex, masculine voice, masculine pattern of hair and muscle. The body, as Butler says, becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time (1988: 523). Reese takes steroids and also engages in body building to make his body more masculine. Apart from these routes of bodily transformations, he undergoes a sex reassignment surgery in New York. Jude manages a second job as a caterer in Beverley Hills to help him pay for breast removal surgery.

Unlike gender performativity, Reese's undoing gender is an individual choice, or rather, a radical choice. Reese and Jude share a commonality in that they have been tortured by their respective societies because of his gender and her race. This is why they now share empathy and closeness. His gender passing or undoing gender manifests in his performative bodily acts for long seven years. Previously, he was a female. However, he discards the gender role which he is supposed to play as a female. At present, he performs as a male and makes love with Jude. He shows true masculinity, rather than female masculinity. Thus, he shows performative fluidity which breaks the stability of gender. What makes Reese so confident to love a girl and even make love with her is just his performative accomplishment of newly-enacted gender. Incessant efforts of keeping consistency in performative reiterations make him achieve his desired goal. Reese and Jude attend Adele's funeral in Mallard where on the day of funeral, Desiree teases Reese about marrying Jude. This event bespeaks of his acceptability as a man whose embodied acts make the beholder believe in the role he played. Actually, there are no possibilities to believe an unknown person in the locality. The people only believe his characteristics and doings. The way Stella's racial passing or social performance is never doubted or questioned, just the same way Reese's gender passing is hardly distrusted. The point is that their social performances are so reiterated and effectively get played out that their performativities bear witness to lived realities. Butler argues as follows:

> [G]ender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual

> actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. The complex components that go into an act must be distinguished in order to understand the kind of acting in concert and acting in accord which acting one's gender invariably is. (1988: 526)

An embodied self or a systematically constituted self, as Reese exhibits it, goes through a complex reiterated process of appropriation. Unlike Barry's theatrical performances, Reese's performances are unscripted and repeated through time. The latter's daily performances are unscripted by virtue of their nature, as the performances are influenced by various social contexts. These are scripted in accordance with the newly constructed identity, as it were. Reese's continuous reproduction of a "self-embodied/regulated entity" (2020: 59) as set forth by Jesmin finds a stark difference with Barry's stage performances as Bianca who continually, not continuously, enacts the role on two Saturday nights a month in a tiny dark club off Sunset. Barry performs as Bianca at a club in West Hollywood called Mirage. For seven electrifying minutes, Bianca struts onstage, a purple boa wrapped around her broad shoulders, and belted out "Dim All the Lights". She wore ruby red lipstick and a big blonde wig like Dolly Parton. Unlike Reese, Barry's performances on specific weekends are scripted and not repeated. Barry's identity fluctuates between he and she or s/he. Both Reese and Barry's performances signal destabilization of gender identities. During the week, Barry teaches high school chemistry in Santa Monica; he only becomes Bianca on weekdays.

There were other men (equivalent to girls/men as substitute for girls) who perform alongside Barry at his drag nights. Luis who sings Celia Cruz in pink fur who is an accountant. Jamie, who wears a Supremes wig and go-go boots, works for the power company. Harley, transforms himself into Bette Midler, is a costume designer for a minor theater company and helps the others find their wigs. Barry and other men are used to adopting female look in on-stage drag performances. However, they never try to hide that they are biologically male. "[E]veryone knew that it [their gender performativity] was not real" (Bennett 2020: 111). The substitution points to an approximation, uncertainty, or stability of gender lines. Their semblances are nearly, but not exactly the same. Butler's claim- gender is not a stable thing; rather, it is a doing- finds suitability in the context of the drag performances. These drag queens exaggerate female gender signifiers and performativities, cross, or blur gender lines, and thus critiques and challenges arbitrary gender binaries.

> Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, comes to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 1988: 520)

Barry shows his ability to keep his two lives (fe/male) separate, and thus shows the instability of gender performativities in his social performances and her drag performances. [S/he] is Bianca on two Saturdays. In other ways, he pushes her out of sight; even though he thinks about her; he shops for her; he plans for her eventual return. Thus, the fluidity of male and female, or male to female, or female to male, or the cyclic process of certain gender appropriation demonstrate that gender is a fluid signifier just like race. Reese jokes during Barry's drag night saying: "It's not enough to be a woman," "He's [Barry] gotta be a white woman too" (Bennett 2020: 110). Stella crosses racial lines; Reese crosses gender lines. However, Barry in his/her drag performances crosses both racial and gender lines. Bennett's skillful use of the juxtaposition of social performances of Stella and Reese, of undoing racial performances of Stella, of undoing gender performances of Reese, and of Barry's drag performances (between s/he) effectively manifests the fluidity of race and gender. Barry attends faculty meetings and family reunions and church. "Bianca always lingering on the edge of his mind" (Bennett 2020: 129). Like Barry, Stella is split in her performances. Stella acts as a white woman. However, she is also Desiree in her nostalgia and memory. Role playing is important here. The novelist dexterously plans the identical appearances of the twin sisters. What makes fundamental differences between the twins is just their performances. The twins could only be differentiated through their performances, not by their skin colors or overall appearances. The central idea of racial and gender passing or undoing of race and gender is being played out by Stella, Reese, and Barry in *Vanishing Half*.

Barry and Reese meet seven years ago at a disco club. Barry comes to know that Reese is a transsexual as he says to Reese: "I know exactly what you [a transsexual] are" (Bennett 2020: 139). Reese covers his breast by using bandages until he undergoes breast removal surgery. Only Jude and Barry know that Reese's transition from female to male is not complete, so to say. Knowing this fact, Barry boldly approaches Reese. However, the latter politely declines the former's advancements. Jude and Reese fall in love. Both Barry and Jude intimately feel for Reese. A male's feeling for a male, a female's feeling for a male, to put it another way, a male (Barry) and a female's (Jude) attraction for Reese who is born with typically female anatomies (such as breasts still present in body) but feels like a male and even seeks practical ways (such as hormonal medication and surgery) to become a male. Jude and Barry show their individual sexual choices as expressed in their feelings for Reese. Bennett illustrates racial and gender fluidities in broad spectrum and gives an inkling of fluidity of sexuality in the novel.

## Conclusion

This study locates Stella's racial identity and Reese's gender identity which are determined by stylized repetitions of their individual acts and performative accomplishments through time. If reiterating the norms through which racial subjects and gendered subjects are constituted, breaking the norms by which the subjects

are determined reflects undoing racial and gender performativities. A reiterated performance of Stella and Reese finds a stark difference with an intermittent performance of Barry in *Vanishing Half*. That individual performance designating race and gender instead of politically prescribed markers of race and gender is substantiated through Barry's drag performances. Barry, including other drag queens, blurs gender lines and challenges arbitrary racial and gender binaries. Barry and Reese's portrayal show that it always remains possible to make and remake one's gender identity. Stella's continuous efforts to perform whiteness or to perform a specific race remake her identity from Stella Vignes to Stella Sanders. Similarly, a self systematically constituted by Reese goes through a reiterated process of appropriation which reflects in remaking his identity from Therese to Reese. A co-occurrence of rhythmical cadences in the names (Vignes and Sanders; Therese and Reese) might be unintentional. However, the novelist's well-planned portrayal of them successfully demonstrates fluidity of racial and gender identities.

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