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TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S FICTION: AN ANALYSIS OF BRIT BENNETT'S *THE MOTHERS* AND *THE VANISHING HALF*

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The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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ABSTRACT

The classicism of the literary canon is unquestionable, as well as the generalized disinterest of academia in the study of works of "low art," those closest to the wider public. However, African American literature is undergoing a process of evolution in which genre fiction is predominating and marking the future of this ethnic literature. Following a theoretical framework based on Critical Race Theory and Black Feminism, this thesis analyzes the two novels written by the African American author Brit Bennett, *The Mothers* (2016) and *The Vanishing Half* (2020), locating them within the tradition of African American women's fiction. This thesis aims to show the great literary relevance of genre fiction written in the twenty-first century through the rewriting of themes already present in canonical works, taking Bennett and her works as an example deserving of scholarly recognition.

KEYWORDS: African American Literature, Twenty-First Century, Brit Bennett, Popular Fiction, Black Feminism, *The Mothers*, *The Vanishing Half*

RESUMEN

El clasicismo del canon literario es incuestionable, así como el generalizado desapego de la academia a estudiar obras de "arte bajo", las más próximas al público. Sin embargo, la literatura afroamericana está sufriendo un proceso de evolución en el que es la ficción de género la que está predominando y marcando el futuro de dicha literatura étnica. Siguiendo un marco teórico basado en Teoría Crítica de la Raza y el Feminismo Negro, esta tesis analiza las dos novelas escritas por la autora afroamericana Brit Bennett, *Las Madres* (2016) y *La Mitad Evanescente* (2020), situándolas dentro de la tradición de la ficción afroamericana escrita por mujeres. Esta tesis tiene por objetivo demostrar la gran relevancia literaria de la ficción de género escrita en el siglo XXI a través de la reescritura de temas ya presentes en obras canónicas, tomando por ejemplo a Bennett y sus obras, y por ello siendo merecedora de reconocimiento académico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literatura Afroamericana, Siglo XXI, Brit Bennett, Ficción de Género, Feminismo Negro, *Las Madres*, *La Mitad Evanescente*

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INTRODUCTION

The field of African American women's fiction is witnessing the emergence of new promising voices whose novels are enjoying great popularity in the literary market, praised in the United States and internationally alike. For instance, the current shortlist for the soon-to-be-announced Women's Prize for Fiction 2021 features two Black American authors. The African-born Yaa Gyasi with *Homegoing*, and the African American Brit Bennett with *The Vanishing Half*. At present, the name "Brit Bennett" is all over the current literary scene due to the huge commercial success of her novels. However, Bennett's novels have not received significant scholarly attention yet. The present study undertakes an analysis of Brit Bennett's novels *The Mothers* (2016) and *The Vanishing Half* (2020), as one of the many representatives of twenty-first-century African American fiction, in the field of women's writing. In contemplating Bennett's novels, I intend to contribute to addressing the question of what twenty-first-century African American fiction is, or at least one of its many branches. This dissertation argues that Bennett's novels demonstrate the need for academia to consider genre fiction in its study of African American literature in order to achieve a genuine understanding of this ethnic literature in the new century. It is precisely through the maintenance of the thematic focus on black women's experience, as well as the rewriting of narratives and characters, and overcoming conventions in both *The Mothers* and The *Vanishing Half*, that Bennett proposes a new path for twenty-first-century African American women's fiction, a path that serves to shatter the notion between high and low fiction.

This study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter, titled "Contemporary African American Fiction," offers a brief overview of the diverse opinions of scholars regarding the existence or not of African American fiction at present. In agreement with those who defend the continuation and the necessity of this ethnic literature, the chapter proceeds with an examination of popular fiction as an outstanding genre in the twenty-first century for African American fiction. It also includes an introduction to Brit Bennett and a summary of each of her novels, which this thesis analyses in the third chapter. The second chapter, titled "Theorizing Race and Gender," cites *Critical Race Theory* by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, and mainly relies on *Black Feminist Thought* by the acclaimed sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. Collins' work is complemented using an array of Black Feminist intellectuals, such as bell hooks, Francis Beal, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Monique W. Morris, Tressie McMillan Cottom, Mikki Kendall, Morgan Jerkins, and Brittney Cooper, to provide a compendium of black womanhood in the United States, focusing on aspects such as black motherhood,

colorism and beauty, racial passing, and gender-based violence. This chapter merges real-life facts and fiction by looking at how these issues of concern to Black Feminism have been portrayed in African American women's fiction from the twentieth century. The third chapter, "Bennett's Portrait of the Racial Experience and Black Womanhood," analyses Bennett's novels *The Mothers* and *The Vanishing Half* by exploring how Bennett translated the issues discussed in the second chapter—motherhood, colorism, racial passing, and domestic and sexual violence—as well as the racial experience into her fiction. Although the focus of this thesis is the study of Bennett's fiction, some attention is paid to other novels written by African American women during the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, a necessary step to contextualize Bennett's novel within a literary tradition, highlighting the intertextual connections found in Bennett's novels to situate her fiction in the wider context and within the tradition of African American women's fiction. These other novels studied include: *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and *Sula* (1973, Gloria *Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), Sapphire's *Push* (1996), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), and *Silver Sparrow* (2011) by Tayari Jones. I approach these novels by tracing thematic connections among them to show the *a priori* "invisible" intertextuality found in Bennett's novels, which consists not only in a thematic relationship but also in an exquisite mirroring of scenes and an updating of specific characters. Besides, the study of Bennett's two novels alongside other previous novels allows this study to examine how Bennett rewrites the tradition and surpasses conventions and tropes while offering new narrative possibilities for African American women's fiction in the twenty-first century.

1. CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION

African American fiction is dead. At least that is what Kenneth W. Warren affirms under the argument that African American fiction was "a postemancipation phenomenon," exclusively written during Jim Crow Era (1). Warren further claims there was no tradition before nor after because "the mere existence of literary texts does not necessarily indicate the existence of a literature" (6). That is to say, Warren exclusively considers African American fiction the texts written from the 1870s to the 1960s whose contemporary readers, both black and white, had a first-hand experience of Jim Crow's institutionalized racism. Challenging Warren's argument, Rafia Zafar contends that, considering that racial inequality still overshadows the African American experience, "we need instead to further contextualize, periodize, and particularize its currents in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" (402). Indeed, to agree with Warren implies forgetting a pivotal literary period for contemporary African American literature after the endpoint of the era of Jim Crow. The end of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of what Madhu Dubey calls the "second renaissance" of African American women writers in the 1970s (159-160), such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Gayl Jones, and Alice Walker, among many others. Morrison is considered to have started this second renaissance with her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

Bernard W. Bell holds that the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s prompted this literary resurgence as "publishers become more receptive to the voices of black women writers" (240). Within the genres that these women wrote, Bell distinguishes the traditions of the slave narrative, romance, neorealism, fable, and satire (245), and points to eight main patterns and themes their novels have in common:

> (1) Motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist oppression; (2) black female protagonists; (3) spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy and creativity; (4) a centrality of female bonding or networking; (5) a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community; (6) deeper, more detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions; (7) iconography of women's clothing; and (8) black female language. (242-3)

This novelistic tradition centered on the black woman's experience born at the end of the twentieth century seems to have been extended into the new century. For example, Trudier Harris notices that the neo-slave subgenre is still present in the twenty-first century, allowing authors to transform the agency given to African American characters in previous narratives (271). Furthermore, some of the already mentioned writers have published more novels this new century, like Toni Morrison who continued to write until her passing in 2019.

Contemporary African American women authors of the late twentieth century also include younger turn-of-the-century writers, such as Danzy Senna who debuted in 1998 with the passing novel *Caucasia* and who has published four other books in the last twenty years. At this point, the question that concerns this study is: Is there an African American Literature in the twenty-first century? If so, what is it? Does it establish a break with twentieth-century fiction or is it a continuation of the same?

1.1 Twenty-First-Century African American Fiction

To define twenty-first-century African American fiction is challenging inasmuch as we have just entered the year 2021. There is scarce bibliography about it, and the works and authors that have been studied mainly fall within the first decade. Stephanie Li holds that during the first decade of the twenty-first century there have been several failed attempts "to identify what comes next for African American literature: post-black, post-soul, the newblack, even the new new black" (631). Martha Southgate connects late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century African American fiction using the term "post-oppression fiction," which includes the works "written mostly by [black] writers born after 1959" (256). According to Southgate, these novels are filled with nuances, "These fictions are not devoid of history. Not outside of it. Not free of the effects of racism and race—but the characters in them experience history—very differently than those who came before us" (256). In line with Southgate, E. Lâle Demirtürk assures that the contemporary twenty-first-century African American novel focuses on the present instead of the past, "telling the complex stories of how the black characters negotiate their racial identity" (xxiv). For instance, Tayari Jones declared in 2010 her commitment to focus on contemporary narratives of African American life, "I think at some point we've got to step up into the future, write into the now" (qtd. in Southgate 256).[1] A defining characteristic of twenty-first-century African American fiction, Dubey holds, is the gaining relevance of popular fiction because black women writers are producing an "array of popular and middle-brow genres," with novels that "deal with discrete segments of black female experience, reflecting the splintered nature of racial beauty and community in the post-civil rights era" (165). Yet Susanne B. Dietzel points out there is uncertainty in the definition of popular fiction as the question is still whether style, purpose, intended reader, or the popularity of the text is the defining characteristic of popular fiction (157), and remarks

[1] Tayari Jones won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2019 for *An American Marriage* (2018).

that to reduce contemporary African American popular fiction to "a simple formula" is incompatible with the richness of its diversity (167-8).[2] Significantly, the growing influence of popular fiction raises, once again, the never-ending debate between high and low literature. In this regard, Herman Beavers defends that "it is a mistake to uncouple popular fiction from 'literary' fiction or *belles-lettres*" (265). Be that as it may, the beneficial aspect of popular fiction is its proximity to a wider public, bringing in some cases the literary canon closer to the masses, rebelling against classicism.

Above all, twenty-first-century African American fiction is witnessing the emergence of promising young novelists. Among these, Li alludes to the diaspora of African-born authors, mentioning Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,[3] as well as the "new exciting voices" that resonate with Toni Morrison's style, including Brit Bennett (632-33). In short, the hardship to define twenty-first-century African American fiction comes from the great diversity of authors and genres, the lack of agreement to name the current African American literary production, but overall because it is still in its infancy.

1.2 A New African American Voice: Brit Bennett

Brit Bennett is an African American novelist born in Southern California in 1990. She graduated from Stanford University, holds an MFA in Fiction from the University of Michigan, and is the author of two *New York Times*-bestselling novels, *The Mothers* (2016) and *The Vanishing Half* (2020).[4] Bennett, who was one of the "5 under 35 Honorees" of the National Book Awards in 2016,[5] remarks Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin as two of her literary influences, and groups Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Terry McMillan as her—literary—"Holy Trinity." But, in her words, McMillan is the one that has influenced her to write "about black women who are unlikeable" ("How the Other Half", 25:06 - 26:10). Located in the no man's land between popular and high literature, Bennett's novels demonstrate that popular fiction is not antonymous of high art, as pointed by Beavers. To

[2] Contemporary subgenres of African American popular fiction include family sagas, speculative fiction, detective fiction, black erotica, mystery, romance, girlfriend fiction, fantasy, science fiction, pulp fiction, ghetto realism, adventure fiction, historical fiction, and so forth (Beavers 262, Dietzel 159-161).
[3] In 2007, Ngozi Adichie won the Women's Prize for Fiction for *Half a Yellow Sun* (2006).
[4] *The Vanishing Half* won the 2020 Book of the Year Award and is currently shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2021. Current nominees and previous winners can be consulted at www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/.
[5] Bennett was selected by Caren B. Stelson. Her nomination can be consulted at www.nationalbook.org/awards-prizes/5-under-35-2016/ ("Discover the 5 Under 35 Honorees 2016").

give an illustration, Dr. Kalenda Eaton praised Bennett by describing her debut novel as a "superior contemporary story that reminds us that even in the rush of the twenty-first century, classic texts are still being born" (141).[6] This thesis understands Bennett's work as popular fiction given its marketplace success with two easy-to-read bestselling novels that have been extensively discussed in multiple book clubs.[7] In addition, Bennett's success goes beyond ink and paper and both novels are on their way to the celluloid screen. *The Mothers* is being adapted into a film for Warner Bros (Ford), while the rights of *The Vanishing Half* were acquired by HBO for a limited series adaptation soon after its release (Fleming Jr.).[8] Although Bennett considers herself exclusively a fiction writer, she has published several articles since 2014 in *Jezebel*, *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *The New Republic*, and *The Oxford American.*[9]

1.2.1 *The Mothers*

The Mothers is a contemporary coming-of-age story set in Southern California. It follows the lives of Nadia Turner, Luke Sheppard, and Aubrey Evans, three African American youngsters who live in a small black community. Nadia is a pregnant seventeen-year-old, grieving for her mother's suicide. When Nadia tells Luke her indisputable decision to get an abortion, their relationship ends. In parallel, Aubrey, who is sixteen, is a newcomer that lives with her lesbian sister, Monique. Nadia and Aubrey start an unexpected friendship that lasts until Nadia leaves for college, starting a story of long-lost friendship, love, and choices. Luke and Aubrey fall in love and get married, but everything falls apart when Nadia returns. Bennett states that with this novel she was willing to explore "the ways women can love and also betray each other" ("Brit Bennett, 'The Mothers'" 08:24-27). *The Mothers* discusses themes such as abortion, motherhood, shame, Black Community, and female friendship, soaked with imprints of Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

[6] Dr. Kalenda Eaton is a scholar of Black Literary Studies and a professor of African American Studies at the University of Oklahoma.
[7] Book clubs have encouraged the increasing readership of African American popular fiction while drawing a line between high and low fiction: "The proliferation of black book clubs is just one of the signs of the tremendous boundary separating the academic and nonacademic worlds where reading novels is central to both" (Graham 7). Under the subgenre of women's fiction, Penguin Random House catalogs Bennett's novels as literary fiction. Aware of the importance of book clubs, Penguin Random House offers a reading guide, a book club kit, and an inspired cocktail recipe for Bennett's second novel *The Vanishing Half*. ("The Vanishing Half Book Club Kit").
[8] This process of adaptation from book to film reminds of the evolution of notorious works by previous African American women writers, such as the adaptations of McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* or Walker's *The Color Purple*.
[9] Bennett's articles can be consulted on her official website: www.britbennett.com.

1.2.2 *The Vanishing Half*

The Vanishing Half is a coming-of-age novel and a family saga divided into six parts. In 1968, the teenage Vignes twins—Stella and Desiree—live with their mother in Mallard, a small all-black color struck—fictional—southern town. The twins decide to run away to New Orleans at the age of sixteen, but Stella soon realizes that she can pass for white. She abandons Desiree and marries her rich white boss. In contrast, Desiree marries a black man who soon becomes an abusive husband. Desiree returns to Mallard to escape her marriage and there she raises Jude, her daughter, who will suffer Mallard's discrimination for her skin color in a *The Bluest Eye*-style. Bennett declared in an interview with *Vulture* that in her second novel she aimed to explore the losses rather than the gains of white-passing, "the idea of what she is losing was the most interesting. Losing her family, her connection to her sister, her connection to her home" (Shapiro). *The Vanishing Half* is a novel about the consequences of colorism and racial passing, exploring the interrelation between gender, race, and identity.

2. THEORIZING RACE AND GENDER

> It [a wedding picture] marked the page that delineated the three racial phenotypes of the world—Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid. The page included three drawings, the first of a Chinaman, the second of an African Bushman, and the third of a European explorer, but I was more interested in the wedding photograph.
>
> Danzy Senna, *Caucasia*

Birdie, *Caucasia*'s biracial protagonist, embodies the innocence of a child who does not yet understand the implication of race in the United States. Ralina L. Joseph already signaled in 2013 that "the belief that the United States is beyond issues of race … has infected the nation like a plague" (167). Supporting this view, Ytasha L. Womack claims that Obama's presidency confirmed that "issues of race run deep in our culture, institutions, and national psyche" (x). Thus, post-racial America is nothing but a dream yet, especially if considering that Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, renowned scholars of Critical Race Theory, allege that racism is "the common, everyday experience of most people of color" in the United States (8), which consists in the oppression of minority groups, through a wide range of conscious and unconscious racist practices.[10] Critical Race Theory defends that race is the outcome of "social thought and relations" (9). Hence, as a social construct and not a biological determination, only physical traits might be shared among the individuals that belong to a certain race (9). Delgado and Stefancic hold that racism is constructed on a black-white binary that demonizes blackness and assigns purity to whiteness based on color symbolism (85-6), but it also goes beyond prejudices about a certain group and is instead the mechanism through which "society allocates privilege and status" (21). In this sense, Delgado and Stefancic connect racism with what they call "box checking," which is used to classify "citizens into boxes" (83, 80). Influenced by "box checking," non-white or colored people whose skin is lighter—therefore closer to a white appearance—might benefit from it as it keeps them from "being thought of and treated as black or brown" (83), plus it gives them the possibility of passing for white (85). In this regard, Adrien Katherine Wing signals that "light-skinned blacks have received benefits dating back to slavery, often because they were the master's illegitimate progeny" (8). However, Delgado and Stefancic point out that, in order to understand a person's identity and experience in the United States, other "disadvantaging factors" apart from race—such as gender, sexuality, and class—should be

[10] These practices include, "biological racism; intentional racism; unconscious racism; microaggressions; nativism; institutional racism; racism tinged with homophobia or sexism; racism that takes the form of indifference, coldness, or implicit associations …" and so forth (Delgado and Stefancic 31).

analyzed (58). The union of these "disadvantaging factors" is the main concern of Black Feminism.

Black Feminism emerged due to the marginalization of black women from mainstream—white—feminism, concerned with the interplay of the "disadvantaging factors" that determine the many shades of black womanhood in the United States. A state of "double jeopardy," that is how Frances Beal described black women's situation in the United States in 1969, whose status she categorized as that of "a slave of a slave" (112). Later, in 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw reformulated Beal's "double jeopardy" as "double subordination," and proposed the study of the so-called "intersectionality"—the rejection of a "single-issue framework" (152). Crenshaw defended that black women's discrimination was unique and inherent to their race and gender:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (149)

Later, in *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins referred to these "intersecting oppressions" as a "matrix of domination" (203). This chapter explores the many shades of black womanhood in the United States, focusing on the politics of motherhood, gender-based violence, colorism and beauty, and racial passing.

2.1 The Many Shades of Black Womanhood

> He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.
>
> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

"Nothing at all", that is Albert's perception of Celie, his wife. His order of identification: race, class, sexuality, and gender; the individual factors that form the intersectionality of black womanhood. As reported by Collins, the self-worth and respectability of black American women depend on how their communities see them, based on notions of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (72). And, as Tressie McMillan Cottom states, "there is not just one black woman experience, no matter how thick one black woman may be" (12). Experiences that are influenced by each woman's affairs with motherhood, sexuality, violence, beauty, and, in some cases, white passing. These are some of the many

shades of black womanhood that African American women's literature has echoed in its many fictional narratives.

2.2.1 Black Motherhood

> From the clucking sound of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother.
>
> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

The blue-eyed doll is a gendered gift that aims to teach a little black girl the "natural" roles of a woman. What her life should be and what she should desire. Perhaps a not-so harmless doll as it is blond and blue-eyed. A "beautiful" doll that Claudia soon dismembers, pulling out the blue eyes and the yellow strings of hair. As Claudia demonstrates, not all women dream of motherhood. Collins reinforces the importance of motherhood in black communities by depicting it as a "dynamic and dialectal" institution (176), affirming that black mothers are praised if they devote their lives to their children (174). Similarly, bell hooks argued that some black women might commit to motherhood because it is their only "sphere of power" (*Feminist Theory* 140). Yet Collins alleges that motherhood can be either the key to self-affirmation and status or simply another form of oppression (176). These diverse experiences of motherhood have been deeply explored in African American women's fiction. The pregnancies of Celie in Walker's *The Color Purple* and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* are the result of their rapes. Hence, they experience forced motherhood through sexual vulnerability. Other women do not desire motherhood and encounter it as a limitation, such as Shug in *The Color Purple*, who abandons her children to pursue her career as a blues singer. Some black women will feel blessed by motherhood, like Marguerite in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, who feels overwhelmed when she finally holds her newborn, "I had a baby. He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine" (308). Nonetheless, black motherhood is not limited to biological parents. According to hooks, in smaller black communities, it is ordinary that some mothers might ask for help from family, friends, or people of the community to help them with their children for different reasons (*Feminist Theory* 142). Collins points out

that Black women construct "women-centered networks of bloodmothers and othermothers" to help each other with their motherly duties (178).[11]

Moreover, Collins signals that black female identity is accompanied by controlling images of motherhood, including the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother (69-80). Monique W. Morris, as well as many other black feminists, agrees with this affirmation while signaling that these stereotypes are "sometimes inconsistent with data" (137).[12] The two most widely used stereotypes are the binary opposites of the mammy and the matriarch. On the one hand, Collins defines the mammy as the ideal black woman in a white supremacist society (73), a woman who is idealized because her "maternal instincts made her the most domesticated and dutiful slave; she embodied the archetype of a protector" (Sewell 311). If mammies have a family of their own, they neglect their children and teach them their—inferior—place in society (Collins 73). A literary example of a mammy would be Pecola Breedlove's mother, Pauline, in *The Bluest Eye*. She is often absent from the black home and neglects her children, but she is a sweet protector of the little Fisher girl. As a perfect mammy, Pauline finds that "All the meaningfulness of her life was in her work" (126). On the other hand, following Collins' description, matriarchs are failed mammies, black women who do not accept their subordination and because of this they are depicted as unfeminine, violent, and emasculating (75). In addition, Christopher Sewell posits that the matriarch does take care of her biological children, making sure "that everything is going as best as they can for her family" (314). A great literary example of a matriarch is Sofia in *The Color Purple.* Sofia rejects her subordination to all men and emasculates her husband, Harpo. Her aggressiveness is noteworthy, depicted as brave and unafraid, she is "the kind of woman no matter what she have in her hand it look like a weapon" (239). Another controlling image is what Collins calls the "welfare mother," also known as the "Welfare Queen." This is the stereotype of the unemployed and "sexually promiscuous single African American mother who scams taxpayers by having babies then demanding public support" (Foster 163). In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor made Cora Lee a perfect "Welfare Queen." Cora is sexually promiscuous—not because she is sexually active, but because she is visited at night by diverse unknown male shadows—she neglects her older children and is recurrently pregnant obsessed with the thought that "*babies grow up*" (140), plus demanding welfare to support her family. However, the inconsistency of the image of African American women as

[11] Collins gives the name of "othermothers" to any women, blood-related or not, that helps other women with child-rearing. When it comes to the motherhood performed by the entire community, she calls that "community othermother" (190-92).

[12] The data recollected by Morris cited in this paper regards the situation of African Americans in the twenty-first century.

child breeders is that, as Brittney Cooper reports, "black women have proportionally higher rates of abortion than any other group" (116). Looking at statistics, Morris notices that black women's abortion rate is higher than white women's, even if black women's abortions have dropped from a rate of 64 to 48 percent in the last years (147-8). Last but not least, the most widespread image of black women as mothers is that of the "super strong black woman." This stereotype reinforces the crucial role of black women in their families and communities as they must "be strong and be solely responsible" for the well-being of their families (Elliot and Reid 50). Looking at literary representations, both Mattie Michael from *The Women of Brewster Place* and Gloria from *Waiting to Exhale* are "super strong black women" insomuch as they devote their lives to their unplanned sons being single mothers, and ultimately forget their own identities becoming asexual women.

2.2.2 Sexual Politics and Violence

> She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She has summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.
>
> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The sweet pain of an orgasm under a pear tree blooms Janie into womanhood and the realms of her sexuality. Following Collins' theory, sexuality is another system of oppression as black heterosexism is often imposed to control black women's "sexuality on the interpersonal level" (128, 168). And, as with motherhood, there are specific controlling images regarding black women's sexuality. The stereotype of the jezebel was created by white men during slavery to justify the rapes of black women under the excuse they were sexually deviant (Woodard and Mastin 272). In this regard, Cooper holds still at present black women "experience much handwringing around owning our sexuality" (133), because the black female body is "coded as hypersexual as excessively vulgar" (177). A literary example of a contemporary jezebel is Sula in Morrison's eponymous novel, who refuses to have a normative life. She sleeps with her best friend's husband and has sex with white men being guilty of "the unforgivable thing" (*Sula* 112).

In connection with heterosexism, bell hooks affirms that black men have been historically perceived as "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderous" (*We Real Cool* x), stereotypes created and used by white supremacy to justify Black men's oppression (44-45). However, as Raewyn Connell maintains, black men do normally embody

marginalized masculinity—imposed by white supremacy—but some might adopt protest masculinity, and may use violence against women to reclaim the power that is denied to them in society (114).[13] This sexist violence, Robert Staples argues, is prompted by a "feeling of inferiority" and "fear of vulnerability" (123), as they are, as Cooper formulates, "frustrated patriarchs" (187). In hand with this frustrated masculinity, Collins assures that Black women are in general victims of routinely domestic violence in their homes (159). Most of the abused Black women do not fight their abuser, bell hooks states, because they justify black men's violence perceiving it as the result of their own oppression (*Feminist Theory* 76), or as Collins argues, they keep silent to protect black men's public image (157). As well, Collins holds that black women are more vulnerable to sexual abuse because they "are less likely to report their rapes," which are often executed by black men (147). Cooper clarifies nowadays the majority of rapes are intra-racial (183), while McMillan Cottom justifies black women are culturally silenced, "We are most vulnerable to the men in our home. We are taught to blame ourselves. We fear reprisal for speaking up. But black women and girls face additional burdens of protecting the reputation of black boys and men" (193). In agreement with these contemporary views, Mikki Kendall points out that according to recent research, "some to 40 to 60 percent of Black American girls are sexually abused before age eighteen" (48), highlighting that for black women in the United States, "unpunished sexual violence was and remains a constant threat" (52).[14] Consequently, African American women's fiction has been concerned with both domestic and sexual violence.

In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Janie suffers domestic violence in her marriages. Her second husband, Joe Starks, slaps her to punish her for an uncooked deceiving dinner, "until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked on back to the store" (82). Her third husband, Tea Cake, whips her to reinforce his masculinity and superiority to her, "it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whipe her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss" (167). Nonetheless, African American women writers have also attempted to surpass the idea that their female characters should accept their subordination to a patriarchal figure. Janie ridicules Joe for his physique in revenge, robbing him "of his illusion

[13] Hegemonic masculinity is the one at the top of power and is considered as "the currently most honored way of being a man" for it is related to whiteness, heterosexuality, and class (Connell and Messerschmidt 832), while marginalized masculinity is the lowest masculinity in the hierarchy of power and is determined by factors external to gender, such as race and class (Connell 80).

[14] Morris alleges that "Black girls have the highest case rate of offenses against persons (assault, robbery, rape, etc.), 18.9," which triples the risk of white girls, with a 5.2 rate. (140)

of irresistible maleness that all men cherish" (91). Another example of a revolutionary black woman is Sofia in *The Color Purple*:

> All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, ... God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (39)

With these words, Sofia highlights how black women and girls are victims of both sexual and domestic violence even in what is supposed to be a safe place: their homes. Sofia is a bold woman that defies any kind of domination that attempts to subject her, even if that requires her to adopt the role of the abuser. In this context, Sofia becomes a role model for many other women, like Celie, who have been victims of constant abuse.

As for sexual abuse, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, eight-year-old Marguerite is repeatedly raped by Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend. Traumatized, she is afraid of being seen as "sinful and dirty" by her beloved Uncle Willie (99). In *The Bluest Eye,* eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove is raped by her biological father who gets excited by the very thought of "doing a wild and forbidden thing" (160). Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is the product of her mother's rape by a schoolteacher, who came home "cralin' in on her hand and knees" after the attack (23). Even the first line of *The Color Purple*, "*You better tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy*" (3), introduces the repeated abuses an already pregnant fourteen-year-old Celie suffers from her mother's husband and the man she thinks to be her biological father. These examples from four canonical African American novels include just some of the many sexual cases of abuse that have plagued African American women's narratives.

2.2.3 Colorism and Beauty

> Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.
>
> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Marguerite thinks of herself as a Snow White whose apple was poisoned with ugliness, turning her black. Colorism is another form of oppression black women have experienced since slavery times, and which has had an overwhelming impact on beauty standards

throughout history.[15] Collins argues that colorism criminalizes black men for their blackness—police brutality confirms that—while it judges black women based on physique (89). Founded on the binaries of the "ugly" and the "desired", Collins holds that "blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (89).[16] However, Kendall states that "While we know that colorism refers to discrimination based on skin color and that it disadvantages dark-skinned people while privileging those with lighter skin, it is about more than just beauty aesthetics" (107). Likewise, McMillan Cottom affirms that white-influenced beauty standards "reproduce the existing social order" (44), therefore "black women are not beautiful except for any whiteness that may be in them" (56). But colorism in the United States is not exclusively experienced when exposed to the white gaze, as Kendall assures, it can also be experienced both outside and inside the community (107). In line with Aisha Phoenix's study, colorism is still a problem in the twenty-first century since, for example, non-white female celebrities are often light-skinned, how not to mention Beyoncé or Mariah Carey (101). Moreover, the white film industry still presents natural hair as undesirable, "something that needs to be transformed" (Jerkins 256). As a result of all this, many black women have used skin bleaching treatments, hair softening and perms, and weaves to come closer to beauty ideals—even illegal toxic products or ethnic cosmetic surgery (Phoenix 100).

The main literary victim of colorism that shows its fatal consequences is Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola is a little black girl whose only dream is to have blue eyes after suffering the extreme rejection of her own black community for her blackness, "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of her ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (43). Yet, Collins defends that even if light-skinned black women may benefit from colorism, they are more likely to be victims of sexual violence as their bodies are perceived as more desirable (91), as happens with the rape of Janie's mother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Besides, Womack points out that inside the black community colorism encourages elitism in the mentality of being "better than" (70). For example, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Mrs. Turner, a black woman with a pointed nose, portrays this uppity:

[15] Light-skinned slaves received a different, "preferential treatment" than those with dark skin (Phoenix 100-1). For instance, the "beautiful" lighter-skinned female slaves that looked biracial worked in the white homes, while the "ugly" brown-skinned were kept outside, working in the fields (Patton 26).

[16] Kendall uses the term "texturism" to refer to "the valuing of certain textures above others" (103). This explains why black women have extensively permed their hair, as Morgan Jerkins affirms, "surrendering to the dominant white culture" (43). Nevertheless, Jerkins also clarifies some black women use perms as "an aesthetic choice" (43).

> Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in her criteria, therefore it was right that they should be cruel to her at times, just as she was cruel to those more negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness. (164)

On that account, colorism is a form of racism and oppression that can be enacted by whites and blacks alike. The presence of colorism in black communities signals the adoption of white hegemonic beauty ideals to benefit from a superior status or acceptance in society.

2.2.4 Performing Race: White Passing

> They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gypsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro.
> Nela Larsen, *Passing*

A lighter skin complexion allows the possibility of performing race, also known as "passing." Catherine Rottenberg reports that the passing narrative emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century when "African-American writers such as William Wells Brown and Frances Harper began invoking the phenomenon of passing in their texts as a way of investigating the complexities and contradictions of the category of race in the United States" (435). Relatedly, Dubey notes white-passing characters allowed authors to explore the implications of racial segregation while giving African American characters access to the American dream (156). Often the passer is a female who falls into the stereotype of the "tragic mulatta," with a life doomed to unhappiness and an inevitable tragic finale:

> If light enough to "pass" as white, she did, but passing led to deeper self-loathing. She pitied or despised blacks and the "blackness" in herself; she hated or feared whites yet desperately sought their approval. In a race-based society, the tragic mulatto found peace only in death. She evoked pity or scorn, not sympathy. (Pilgrim)

Nella Larsen, who was biracial and experienced the odds of her racial identity, wrote what is arguably the most popular passing narrative to this day, the short novel *Passing*, which in the view of Rottenberg has overshadowed previous passing stories (435). Allyson Hobbs affirms that Larsen was aware that "racial and gender identities were mutually constitutive, [and] both in her own life and in her novels; race inflected gender just as much as gender inflected race" (201). In the novella, Larsen explored the benefits and risks of passing, the different ways in which "passing" can be performed, and the consequences of passing for white. "Passing" may be deliberate or unintended, momentary or a way of life, but always a secret

that no one should find out.[17] The benefit of passing for white is obvious—white privilege. Yet passing includes a wide range of risks, especially if the "passing" is discovered. Among all the risks, the one that goes in hand with passing and gender is the risk that motherhood represents with the fear of giving birth to a dark baby. This is influenced by the one-drop rule since, regardless of skin color, a drop of black blood in one's identity implies a direct assignation of blackness and social inferiority. A great example of this cost is Kate Chopin's short story "Désireé's Baby."[18] With a newborn that becomes darker and darker, Désireé and her baby are repudiated by Armand—Désireé's husband and the baby's biological father. The blame is put on Désireé, to later find out in a letter that the blackness of the child comes from Armand's side, "I [Armand's mother] thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (245). Thus, Désireé is an innocent victim of an undiscovered passing: a woman punished for another woman's passing.

Larsen uses the trope of the tragic mulatta with Clare Kendry, although with an enigmatic death that can be interpreted either as murder or suicide. Nevertheless, twenty-first-century African American women's fiction is rewriting the passing narrative, as Brit Bennett does in *The Vanishing Half*. In his analysis of *Caucasia,* Richard Schur highlights that Birdie, the protagonist, "survives unlike the 'tragic mulattoes' of earlier periods" (240), which contrasts with Clare Kendry's abrupt death in *Passing.* Eve A. Raimon alleges that the subversion of the "tragic mulatta" trope is the consequence of growing feminism in the 1980s that rejected hegemonic sexist stereotypes (25). In brief, the passing narrative is a mesmerizing genre that allows fiction writers to explore the social construction of race and how it affects gender and identity.

[17] By unintended I mean that white-looking black people who do not have the intention to pass may be mistaken for white by others, either blacks or whites.

[18] Many thanks to my supervisor Dr. Jesús Benito Sánchez for reminding me of this short story, which he often mentioned during his undergraduate courses.

3. BENNETT'S PORTRAIT OF THE RACIAL EXPERIENCE AND BLACK WOMANHOOD

What the protagonists of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Color Purple*, *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Push*, and *Waiting to Exhale* have in common is their suffering that roots in the intersection of their race and gender—their black womanhood—and which is caused by different forms of oppression, such as sexual politics, motherhood, or unachievable beauty standards, among many others. Brit Bennett offers a complete revision of black girlhood and womanhood in *The Mothers* and *The Vanishing Half*, focusing on the many experiences of African American women, connecting with earlier narratives in her treatment of racial oppression, the importance of the community and sisterhood, colorism, racial passing, motherhood, and gender-based violence.

3.1 Past and Present: Black Subordination

> You were supposed to be safe in Mallard—that strange, separate town—hidden amongst your own. But even here, where nobody married dark, you were still colored and that meant that white men could kill you for refusing to die. The Vignes twins were reminders of this, tiny girls in funeral dresses who grew up without a daddy because white men decided it would be so.
>
> Brit Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*

Fictional Desiree and Stella Vignes counterpart real-life Gianna Floyd: black girls who will grow up without their fathers, never forgetting that their skin color was the cause of their fathers' deaths.[19] While Bennett has claimed that *The Mothers* is not a novel about race, *The Vanishing Half* offers a rough portrait of the racial experience, considering that the first storyline departs in 1968, the year of Martin Luther King's assassination. In her second novel, Bennett recalls the lynching of black men through Leon Vignes and, in doing so, revisits the past of a country that cannot deny its history. In the contemporary story of *The Mothers*, King is an emblem for the African American community and is mentioned with a park named after him. Provided that, it is through her exquisite use of cotton as a symbol of the memory and trauma of the African American experience that Bennett best reviews the implication of race in the United States.

[19] Gianna Floyd is the daughter of George Floyd, who lost her father at the age of six years old.

3.1.1 Memory through Cotton

The presence of cotton in African American novels is outstanding. Of the novels mentioned in this paper, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the one that repeats the word cotton the most, considering the relevance of the cotton industry during the Great Depression. Toni Morrison also referred to cotton in her novels. For example, both *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* include a "blue cotton dress" (75, 104), and in *The Bluest Eye,* a sanitary napkin is called "the cotton thing" when Pecola gets her first period (28). In *The Women of Brewster Place*, there are "cotton houses" (151), "niggers with the cotton still under their fingernails" (155), and "cotton candy" (16). With these deliberate references to cotton, the memory and trauma of racial inequality are unveiled.

Following the steps of her literary predecessors, Bennett includes the word "cotton" seven times in *The Vanishing Half* and nine times in *The Mothers*. Sometimes it is metaphorical, as when a wool jumper is covered in cotton sheep (*The Mothers* 11), or the sweet intonation of a word is depicted as "cotton-soft" (19). Other times, cotton refers directly to the assignation of the black body to cotton fields, as when the Mothers claim, "As girls, we've lived all over. Sharecropping in the cotton fields of Louisiana until the humid air sucked our shirts to our backs" (*The Mothers* 87). Bennett even uses sarcasm when Desiree first meets Sam and thinks, "He might go down to visit [Mallard] and wind up chopping cotton" (*The Vanishing Half* 20). To exemplify, the arguably most unapologetic use of cotton Bennett does is when Leon is lynched for a second time and killed, "This time they shot him twice in the head, his cotton pillowcase blooming red" (34). This way, the pillowcase is transformed into a cotton field that absorbs his blood.

Connected to Leon's lynching, Bennett rewrites Claudia's destruction of the blue-eyed doll in *The Bluest Eye*. Blake, Stella's white husband, remembers he used to play with a ragged black doll—which could perfectly be a Golliwog—that his father abominated. One day, Blake encountered the doll dismembered:

> On the dirt pathway, there was Jimbo, gutted, arms and legs strewn, his insides pulling out. The dog must've got to it, his father told him but Blake always imagined him tossing that doll into the dog's jaws. He'd knelt, picking up one of Jimbo's arms. He'd always wondered what the inside of the doll might look like. For some reason, he'd thought the cotton would be brown. (*The Vanishing Half* 191)

The dissection of the black doll symbolizes the real lynching of black men murdered by white men. Besides, the innocent belief of a little boy who thought that cotton would be brown

reinforces the deep connection between cotton and the black body, becoming part of its biological physiology.

Another rewriting of cotton appears in *The Mothers,* with a cotton candy scene that connects with Tayari Jones' *Silver Sparrow*. In Jones' novel, cotton candy is mentioned when one of the protagonists, Dana, is looking for a job to save up money before going to college. Among all the positions she could be offered, she gets "to spin cotton candy onto paper cones for a nickel over the minimum wage" (151). Despite its innocent appearance, it is a scene that evokes the assignation of the black body to the cotton fields. Bennett rewrites this scene in *The Mothers* with notably sweeter and hopeful connotations. A little black boy buys a blue cotton candy and picks it from the seller smiling, "triumphant, holding the cotton candy in his hands" (143). Written from the perspective of the child and not the vendor, it stands for a metaphorical cotton-picking that induces back to the memory of cotton-picking during slavery in a much more beautiful context.

To sum up, by including references to cotton in her novels, Bennett does not only adhere her writing to a tradition emphasizing her literary influences and intertextual thematic connections, but she also uses it to address black subordination as a latent issue in contemporary America, which she mesmerizingly achieves through the rewriting of the cotton doll and the creation of a pillowcase as a murderous cotton field. However, Bennett transcends the gory significance of cotton with the cotton candy scene, offering a scene full of hope with the little boy who represents new generations of African Americans to come.

3.2 Women and Community: Surpassing Controlling Images

As a writer engaged with Black Feminism, Brit Bennett surpasses the oppressive stereotypes of black women. The only stereotype in her novels appears in *The Vanishing Half*, considering that Adele Vignes stands for a representation of a contemporary mammy. As such, she works for a white family, she is the perfect domestic servant, and attempts to teach her daughters how to be future mammies, with whom she has a troubled relationship. Despite her daughters' willingness to continue attending school, Adele forces them to work for the Dupont family, which is the last straw that encourages the sisters to leave Mallard and move to New Orleans. In *The Mothers*, Bennett dismisses all those stereotypes of black women related to motherhood and sexuality. In fact, the suicide of Elise Turner, Nadia's mother, opposes the stereotype of the "strong black woman," and because of this Elise is judged by

the entire Church community, "A pretty black woman living as fine as any white woman. What did she have to complain about?" (66). Also, sexuality is openly addressed in both novels, without blaming or judging the female character for their desires or the people they love. The elimination of these negative images allows Bennett to create female characters with complex identities and diverse background experiences, women with desires and hopes, in her refusal to reduce them to patterns of behavior or static images. As a result, apart from Adele, there are no jezebels or hoochies, no other contemporary matriarchs nor contemporary mammies, or welfare mothers.

The lack of these negative stereotypes in Bennett's novels might have multiple explanations. One could be that she deliberately did so as a way of denying them. However, her novels have been written once Black Feminism is long-established and the so-called controlling images have been greatly criticized for their racist and sexist perception of black women. For instance, Naylor included multiple characters with traits assigned to controlling images in *The Women of Brewster Place* as a way of exposing and criticizing them, considering that her novel was released as Black Feminism was starting to be loud in the 1980s. Hence, Bennett's novel could be taken as the triumph of Black Feminism in the literary scene that still needs to conquer other arts in which these images are still overused, such as cinema or TV series. In this sense, Bennett demonstrates that it is possible and necessary to write stories about black women that go against the white supremacist mindset.

3.2.1 The Voices of Experience and Black Sisterhood

Bennett portrays the importance of elder African American women in their communities and Church, because as the Mothers claim, "Anyone knows a church is only as good as its women, and when we all passed on to glory, who would hold this church up?" (*The Mothers* 180). The figure of the church mothers does also appear in *Silver Sparrow*, where they are described as controlling and all-knowing, almost omniscient, thanks to their "watchful eyes" (55). This omniscient power is shared in *The Mothers* when the Mothers take over the narrative through their inclusive "we", which, as Reni Eddo-Lodge formulates, "interject into the novel's events in a Greek-style chorus, ever judgmental." As this paper later discusses, the Mothers in *The Mothers* perform motherly duties and are the representatives of traditional gendered roles; for example, through their rejection of abortion and their constant prejudice against women who do not commit to what they believe a black woman should do in life to be considered respectable. In this sense, Bennett demonstrates that Black women's

oppression does not always come from the white side of society or the male gaze and sexual politics. Instead, the church mothers represent oppression for black women within the black community.

Furthermore, like many other woman-centered novels written by African American women, Brit Bennett continues the tradition of writing stories with two protagonists that counterpart each other. In *Passing,* this dichotomy comes with Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. In *Sula*, with Nel and Sula. In *Caucasia*, with Cole and Birdie. In *Silver Sparrow*, with Dana and Chaurisse. As for Brit Bennett's novels, this dichotomy appears in *The Mothers* with Nadia and Aubrey, which could be read as modern updates of Sula (Nadia) and Nel (Aubrey), as they repeat many of the plots of Morrison's narrative. For example, they support each other, but their friendship breaks once Nadia leaves their town. If Sula sleeps with Jude, Nel's husband, Nadia sleeps with Luke, Aubrey's husband. In contrast, in *The Vanishing Half,* there is a double relationship. The first duality comes with the twin sisters, Desiree and Stella, and with their daughters, Kennedy and Jude. A double sisterhood that is used to explore the incongruences of race and identity.

In doing so, Bennett reuses three of the patterns that Bernard W. Bell signaled as common to African American novels written by women in the last decades of the twentieth century. First, Bennett creates woman-centered stories with exclusively female protagonists. Secondly, the creation of female protagonists allows Bennett to explore female bonding and interpersonal female relations, which Bell denominated "networking." And thirdly, with all this combined, Bennett emphasizes personal relationships both in the family sphere and the black community. However, Bennett's portrait of female relationships is not necessarily as supportive as portrayed by Alice Walker, Terry McMillan, even Gloria Naylor. For example, considering the influences of *Sula* in *The Mothers*, Nadia and Aubrey's relationship is about treason and broken relationships. Whereas *The Vanishing Half* is even more defeatist since there is no happy ending in terms of bonding for the sisters and cousins. In this manner, status and respectability are more important to Stella than having a close relationship with her mother and sister. As for Jude and Kennedy, they continue their lives apart. With this in mind, it can be concluded that Bennett does not fall into the cliché that union equals strength and, on the contrary, enhances the individuality of her female characters.

3.3 Colorism in the Black Community

> The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.
>
> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Pecola's blackness condemns her to ugliness due to the white-influenced beauty standards that Claudia's white doll and the candy girl, Mary Jane, represent. In *Waiting to Exhale*, Terry McMillan rewrites the doll scene of *The Bluest Eye* through Bernardine, who only buys black dolls for her little daughter to encourage her to be proud of her racial beauty, "She explained to her daughter a long time ago that she wasn't buying any blond-haired, blue-eyed dolls so Onika would grow up believing that Barbie set the standard for beauty" (296). As well, Bennett includes a direct reference to *The Bluest Eye* by making the bluest eye real in *The Mothers* with a character with heterochromia. While Pecola is bullied for her blackness and prays night and day for blue eyes that will make her beautiful, Latrice was bullied in her childhood because of her unpaired eyes. Latrice's heterochromatic eyes oppose white beauty standards for each eye is beautiful on its own yet ugly for the discordance with the other, "The brown eye seemed ugly next to the blue, the blue next to the brown, and she learned that it was better to just be one thing, that distills yourself into something as simple as you could" (80). With this scene, Bennett does not give the privilege of beauty to the blue eye and, therefore, to white beauty standards. Brit Bennett carries out a profound exploration of colorism and racial beauty in *The Mothers* and *The Vanishing Half*, discussing the impact white-influenced beauty standards have on black women from a young age, affecting their self-image and self-esteem.

3.3.1 "What beautiful girls. So light, aren't they?"

> A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes. A third place.
>
> Brit Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*

Bennett explores colorism to the extent possible in *The Vanishing Half* by setting the story inside the black community. Mallard is an all-black fictional southern town founded by Alphonse Decuir in 1848, a light-skinned freed black man—son to a white slave owner and a black slave—who understood his skin pigmentation as a sign of superiority, just like Mrs. Turner in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Alphonse's dream of an entire colored town was

materialized through a long process of miscegenation that would assure the vanishing of black pigmentation throughout the years:

> Lightness, like anything inherited at a great cost, was a lonely gift. He'd married a mulatto even lighter than himself. She was pregnant with their first child, and he imagines his children's children, lighter still, like a cup of coffee steadily diluted with cream. A more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before. (5-6)

The narrator clarifies that still in 1968 "nobody married black" in Mallard (5), and because of this Mallard is populated by light-skinned blacks, "the darkest ones no swarthier than a Greek" (6). With the creation of this almost mythological town, Bennett proceeds to explore colorism and the connection between ugliness and blackness within the black community, by looking at skin pigmentation and hair texture.

In *The Mothers,* Nadia Turner is described as a beautiful girl because of her light complexion, "she was pretty, beautiful even, with amber skin, silky long hair, and eyes swirled brown and grey and gold" (2). Nadia's lightness is a confirmation of her prettiness and what makes her distinguishable from the other girls in town. When Nadia goes to a strip club to drink alcohol, she has a conversation with the bartender, who thinks her beauty comes from biracial parents:

> "You got a nice face," Cici said. "Those your real eyes? You mixed?"
> "No," she said. "I mean, they are my eyes but I am not mixed."
> "Look mixed to me." Cici blew a sideways stream of smoke. (6)

In this sense, beauty is external to blackness, and some level of whiteness is required as an explanation for prettiness. In *The Vanishing Half*, the Vignes sisters—Decuir's great-great-great-granddaughters—are admired in Mallard for their outstanding lightness, making Alphonse's wish come true almost two centuries later, "Twin girls, creamy skin, hazel eyes, wavy hair. He would have marveled at them. For the child to be a little more perfect than the parents. What could be more wonderful than that?" (6). Likewise, hair is constantly addressed in fiction written by African American women. In *Silver Sparrow*, Dana's long hair is constantly admired by her half-sister Chaurisse, and when she joked about cutting it, she is told, "You are too young to mutilate yourself" (210). In *Waiting to Exhale*, Gloria, who owns a hair salon, points to the high demand for weaves (400), and Bernardine kept her hair long because her husband told her that he would leave her if she cut it (34). Despite Nadia's beauty, her long silky hair in public is discovered to be kinky when in private, which is a source of insecurity, "He had [Luke] never seen her like this before—hair wet and kinky, her face clean of makeup—but she felt pretty as he smiled at her across the table" (*The Mothers*

28). In contrast, the Vignes sisters' hair is naturally wavy, and no confession of their blackness can be identified in their hair texture. As another instance of intertextuality, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Joe used to finger Janie's long black hair during their first year of marriage. With time, Janie's hair became a source of jealousy and he forced her to pin it up:

> Her hair was NOT going to show in the store. It didn't seem sensible at all. That was because John never told Janie how jealous he was. He never told her how often he had seen the other men figurately wallowing in it as she went about things in the store. (62)

Paralleling Joe's adoration of Janie's hair, Bennett includes a similar scene in *The Vanishing Half*, "Early loved her [Desiree's] hair, so she always paid it special attention. Once, Jude had seen him ease up behind her mother and bury his face in a handful of hair" (90). A scene that makes Jude realize how different she looks from her mother, desiring to be beautiful like her.

With the inclusion of light-skinned female characters that are praised in their respective communities, Bennett continues the tradition of writing about white-influenced beauty standards due to colorism, signaling how powerful it is still to the day and reinforcing how black people might adopt a colorist mentality and discriminate themselves, showing that it is a problem within the black community, and it is mainly projected towards women. Furthermore, Bennett goes a step further, and she overtly connects her narratives with previous works through the paralleling of scenes, something that once again underscores her intertextual literary influences, at the same time that portrays the evergreens of colorism. Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937 and almost a century later, in 2020, Bennett wrote *The Vanishing Half*. Despite the pass of time, the presence of colorism persists in both.

3.3.2 A New Pecola Breedlove: Jude Vignes

> *Go back to the jungle, darkie. Go wash your ass. Go, you little culahd biscuit.*
> Danzy Senna, *Caucasia*

Senna's Cole experiences the same rejection as Pecola in her school, constantly insulted by lighter children. In *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett uses Jude Vignes to update and create her own Pecola Breedlove. After running away from Mallard, Stella starts a new life as a white woman, but Desiree marries Sam, a dark black man, and has a child with him, Jude. Mallard judges Desiree instead of Stella as she is seen as the real race traitor, "Playing white to get ahead was just good sense. But marrying a dark man? Carrying his blueback child? Desiree

Vignes had courted the type of trouble that would never leave" (59). While her mother's skin is "the color of sand barely wet" (1), Jude's skin is deep black just like her father's. When they return to Mallard, no one can believe Jude can be Desiree's daughter. In their color struck minds there is no possible explanation for how something so black—therefore ugly—can have come out from something as light—and pretty—as Desiree. Even Stella cannot believe Jude to be her sister's biological child, "The dark girl couldn't be Desiree's daughter. She looked nothing like her. Pure black, like Desiree had never even touched her. She could be anyone" (253). As Bennett rewrites Pecola's experiences through Jude, Bennett parallels again a scene from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie discovers she is not white when she cannot see herself in a school picture, "Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me'" (11). Repeating this scene, Jude realizes that her blackness camouflaged her, "In all her school pictures, she'd either looked too black or too over-exposed, invisible, except for the whites of her eyes and teeth" (108). Raised in Mallard as the only dark-skinned child, Jude suffers the constant discrimination and marginalization of her community, by children and adults alike, and her mere presence is an insult for Mallard's locals:

> The jokes were true. She *was* black. Blueblack. No, so black she looked purple. Black as coffee, asphalt, outer space, black as the beginning and the end of the world. … A black dot in the school pictures, a dark speck on the pews at Sunday Mass, a shadow lingering on the riverbank while the other children swam. So black that you could see nothing but her. A fly in milk, contaminating everything. (84)

The last line summarizes Jude's experience in Mallard: she is the parasite of the perfect whiteness that took more than two centuries to achieve. Due to the skin discrimination Jude suffers, she attempts to get rid of what makes her different, her "endless black" (106). She tries bleaching creams attracted by an advertisement that promotes, "*Life is more fun when your complexion is velar, bright, Nadinola-light*" (106). In a similar scene in *Silver Sparrow*, Ruth Nicole Elizabeth's beautiful light skin is found to be the result of bleaching creams, which is depicted as "magnolia-cream complexion" (238). Yet nothing works for Jude and her skin remains as deep black as the day she was born. Thus, just like Pecola, she has no option to escape her natural "ugliness."

Nevertheless, Bennett rejects the doomed-to-madness narrative and makes Jude a Pecola with a bright future ahead. Like her mother and aunt once did, Jude leaves Mallard. She attends medical school and starts a romantic relationship with Reese, a transexual black man who finds her black skin beautiful. As the narrative develops, there is a notable uplifting of her self-esteem after being away from a toxic place like Mallard. While in Mallard, "she

never dared to swim in the river—imagine showing so much of yourself" (125), the story ends with a Jude that is no longer ashamed of her skin. On the day of her grandmother's funeral, she dares to swim naked for the first time in her life in Mallard's River with Reese, an ultimate act of liberation and self-acceptance.

Ultimately, Bennett's treatment of colorism is quite conservative until she breaks expectations and indirectly redeems Pecola Breedlove through the character of Jude, which becomes her contribution to the genre. Thus, Bennett refuses to submit to and accept generalized notions of colorism, and she turns Jude into a resilient character who is empowered from her experiences as a girl discriminated against because of her skin color. Moreover, Bennett's radical stance against colorism comes with the "destruction"—rather disappearance—of Mallard, the physical embodiment of colorism.

3.4 Rewriting the Passing Narrative

> And when I stopped being nobody, I would become white—white as my skin, hair, bones allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me.
>
> Danzy Senna, *Caucasia*

White passing is the core concern of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, but it was also later explored by Danzy Senna in her turn-of-the-century debut novel *Caucasia*. In *Passing*, Clare Kendry is the full-time passing character who marries a white man, John Bellew, and becomes "white." In contrast, Irene Redfield does not pass as Clare, but she enjoys the benefits of her skin complexion when mistaken for white. Similarly, Danzy Senna explores racial passing in *Caucasia* through the creation of two biracial sisters of different ages. Cole, the elder sister, inherits the black physique of her father, and Birdie is the white-looking little sister who starts passing at a young age forced by her mother to run away from the FBI, "But the fact that I could pass, she explained, with my straight hair, pale skin, my general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race, would throw them off our trail" (128). In both instances, passing for white allows Clare and Birdie the possibility to escape an undesirable situation. While there is no "passing" storyline in *The Mothers*, racial passing is at the core of *The Vanishing Half* through the character of Stella Vignes, who after running away from Mallard marries her boss, a rich white man, and starts a new life as a white woman.

3.4.1 A New Clare Kendry: From Stella Vignes to Stella Sanders

> She had created herself. Since the morning she'd walked out of the Maison Blanche building a white girl, she had decided everything.
>
> Brit Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*

The Vanishing Half could be interpreted as a rewriting of *Passing*, but the transitions from friendship to twin sisters reinforce the irony of racial passing. Thus, as the passing character of the story, Stella Vignes is an updated Clare Kendry, and Desiree Vignes stands for a contemporary Irene Redfield. Like Clare Kendry, Stella Vignes only becomes white by marrying a white man, Blake Sanders. Both Clare and Stella are addressed as actresses in their respective storylines. When Irene thinks of Clare, she has the feeling that "Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps – that is, not too consciously – but, none the less, acting" (Larsen 48). As well, in *The Vanishing Half,* the omniscient narrator states, "All there was to being white was acting like you were" (75). In addition, their "passing" is at first encouraged by an external factor. In *Passing* Clare Kendry was forced at first to pass by her racist white aunts who, "didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced – ruined they called it – a Negro girl. They could forgive the ruin, but they couldn't forgive the tar-brush" (22). As for Stella, her first experiences passing for white are not deliberate. She is mistaken for white in a shop, and a second time in her interview at the Maison Blanche. This second time she realizes the implications of the confusion and how she could benefit from it:

> She had become white because it was practical, so practical that, at the time, her decision seemed laughably obvious. Why wouldn't you be white if you could be? Remaining what you were or becoming something else, it was all choice, any way you looked at it. She had just made the rational decision. (Bennett 225)

Anyhow, both characters voluntarily continue their racial passing, protecting their secret at all costs, living a life on the edge of benefits and costs. As expected, the benefits are those of the dominant race, in other words, white privilege—status, respectability, safety, and money—which both Clare and Stella obtain through their biracial marriages. However, among the multiple costs of passing for white, there is the loss of the family, rootlessness, living a life of secrecy, alienation from both races, the necessity to hide one's true self, and the different forms of punishment if discovered. For instance, Stella tells her sister when they reunite that she has spent her life hiding (322). Another parallelism between Larsen's and Bennett's passing characters is how each one comes closer to women of their real race. Clare Kendry plays a game when she meets Irene and Gertrude, which satisfies her need to feel close to someone. Similarly, Stella befriends Loretta Walker, the mother of the newly arrived

black family in her neighborhood. Loretta, Irene, and Gertrude are the passer's anchors to their real race.

Among all the risks of white-passing, motherhood shows how gendered the passing narrative is, being a theme that both *Passing* and *The Vanishing Half* address. Bennett includes a sequence of parallel scenes to some from Larsen's novel, highlighting the maintenance of concerns as well as the literary influences of her second novel. Both Clare and Stella share the same fear: having a dark baby. Both decided to stay with one child, Marguery and Kennedy respectively, unwilling to take the risk to be discovered. Clare confesses to her friends, "'I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never!" (Larsen 31). Repeating this scene, Bennett enters the thoughts of Stella through a narrator that states, "The idea of pregnancy terrified her; she imagines pushing out a baby that grew darker and darker. Blake recoiling in horror. She almost preferred him to think she'd had an affair with a Negro" (151). Their fears are understandable for one only needs to go back to Kate Chopin's short story "Desiree's Baby" to see the consequences for a woman that gives birth to a dark-skinned baby, even if not "her fault." Opposite to Clare and Stella, even if Irene and Desiree could pass for their light physique, they do not due to their partner choices. Irene, a mother of two boys, says that one of her children is black because "Her husband … couldn't exactly 'pass'" (32). Meanwhile, Desiree cannot pass because she marries Sam, a dark-skinned man, and gives birth to Jude, "his blueback child" (5). Jude is only black because of her father's genetics, and as such, she represents a racial limitation to her mother.

Stella takes so seriously her performance that she unconsciously adopts the mindset of a white supremacist to protect her secret at all costs. Like John Bellew, Clare's husband, who constantly uses the "n-word," Stella tells Kennedy—after seeing her little daughter playing with the Walker daughter—that, "we don't play with niggers" (165). In a later scene, Kennedy repeats her mother's words when she is playing with the Walker girl, in front of Stella and Loretta, the girl's mother. At this point, Stella realizes the harm of her words, "Stella stared into her daughter's face, seeing everyone that she had ever hated" (199). Stella is not a race traitor because she keeps her race a secret almost embarrassed by it, she is so because she starts to think of herself as superior, forgetting where she came from.

Once again, Bennett takes a canonical work written by an African American woman and makes it the basis of her work. In this way, Bennett manages to compare, as with colorism, how the experiences of the female passing figure, whether in 1929 or from 1968

onward, remain the same due to the inherent racism of the United States. However, although her depiction of racial passage is quite conservative, her contribution to the genre comes from her rejection of the stereotypical tragic mulatta.

3.4.2 Surpassing the Tragic Mulatta Trope

> She 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.
>
> Brit Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*

Unlike the traditional passing narrative, Stella's secret is not discovered and, consequently, she does not fall into the "tragic mulatta" trope. Desiree and Jude do tell Kennedy about her mother's real identity, but Blake never discovers the truth about his wife. Because of this, there is no "traditional" punishment for Stella, as there is for Clare Kendry with her suicide/homicide, and she keeps passing for white. However, Stella's fear is not her husband's reaction to the discovery of her race—because Blake Sander is not the racist man John Bellew is in *Passing*—but losing her daughter because of her lies.[20] Notably, the importance of this mother-daughter relationship is the emphasis it makes on the racial heritage children take from their mothers. Kennedy considers herself white as long as her mother's genuine racial identity remains a secret, but as Jude explains to her, a drop of black blood makes you black instantly, following the one-drop rule:

> "I am not a Negro," she said.
> …
> "Well, your mother is," she said.
> "So?"
> "So that makes you one too." (296)

When Kennedy finds out the truth, she undergoes an existential crisis in her attempt to understand her real identity. Ironically, Kennedy inherits her mother's "acting" and becomes an actress, only playing white characters—like her mother in real life—but she also keeps inventing her life, constantly lying:

> All the stories she knew were fiction, so she began to create new ones. She was the daughter of a doctor, an actor, a baseball player. She was taking a break from medical school. She had a boyfriend back home named Reese. She was white, she was black, she became a new person as soon as she crossed the border. She was always inventing her life. (298-99)

[20] Desiree sarcastically points out that for Stella it would be the end of the world if Kennedy finds out "she ain't so lily white—" (322). The term "lily white" is another reference to Larsen's *Passing*, when John says that Clare was "white as a lily" when they got married (35).

In a nutshell, Stella's white-passing has a negative influence on Kennedy's identity. The paradox of this story is that if Stella passes for white to attain a privileged status, Kennedy performs "Jude-passing"—hence, black-passing to some extent—with her lies about going to medical school or having a boyfriend named Reese. Kennedy has everything a passing character would desire—she is "white" with "beautiful" Caucasian features and she belongs to a wealthy white family—however, that is not enough for her. Sarcastically her unconscious desire to be Jude is a reversal of the traditional passing narrative and consequently, a refusal to idolize one race over others.

Bennett's refusal to use the "tragic mulatta" trope confirms Eve. A. Raimon and Richard Schur's argument that twenty-first-century African American women's fiction renounces this sexist and racist image of black women traditionally used. Nonetheless, that is not simply the point Bennett makes in her novel. It is more significant her decision to reverse the passing narrative by including a white-looking (biracial) young woman—Kennedy—desiring the life of a black woman. In addition, this paradox insists on the complexities of racial identity and how a person may struggle because of it living in a world that categorizes and sees you as one thing while you feel the other way.

3.5 Motherhood and Choice

Abortion began to appear in different novels published during the 1980s and 1990s. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, when Luciella Turner finds to be pregnant for a second time, her husband blames her for the unexpected pregnancy and their economic situation—"'I'm fuckin' sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills that's all you good for" (110). As a result, Ciel "decides" to have an abortion, but her unbearable pain makes her disassociate from the body whose uterus is scrapped in an operating room. Also, in Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, there are two protagonists with different experiences regarding abortion. On the one hand, Gloria found to be pregnant in college and she decided to keep the baby, not because of a real desire but influenced by religious beliefs, "she knew she'd committed a major sin by having sexual intercourse before marriage; there was no way she could commit another" (73). On the other hand, Robin is engaged in a toxic and irregular relationship with Russell. She had been pregnant twice before, but she stopped both pregnancies motivated by Russell, who claimed not to be ready for parenthood. At the end of the story, Robin is pregnant for the third time, and she decides to keep the baby no matter what he says, even if

that means becoming a single mother, "I'll finally have somebody I can love as hard as I want to. Somebody who needs *me*" (423-4). Also, in Sapphire's *Push*, Precious does not even consider the option of stopping her two pregnancies as an underage girl—raped and pregnant by her father—and she judges other women who decide to do so, "Abortion is a sin. I hate bitches who kill they babies. They should kill *them*, see how they like it!" (63). Despite the different backgrounds of each of the novels, what they all have in common is the secondary attention given to abortion, which is never the major topic to discuss, being superficially mentioned.

3.5.1 Abortion in the Spotlight

> She wanted this baby and that was the difference: magic you wanted was a miracle, magic you didn't want was a haunting.
>
> Brit Bennett, *The Mothers*

Brit Bennett makes abortion the nucleus of her debut novel, exposing it as a real-life matter that needs to be discussed. However, she does not place the focus on the politics of abortion, but rather on the impact an unwanted pregnancy and an abortion can have on a woman's life and the ones around her. *The Mothers* aims to show that abortion is a woman's decision and never a game carried at ease, "Maybe abortion seemed different when it was just an interesting topic to write a paper about or debate over drinks, when you never imagined it might affect you" (149), while also emphasizing that no one has the right to judge a woman's decision because "You didn't know how desperate you could be until you were" (96). This introspection is reinforced through the character of Latrice, who realizes that "A girl who didn't want a baby would find a way to not have one" (61), followed by an anecdote told by Kasey, a nurse, in which a Mexican girl almost bled to death for taking illegal abortion pills. But Nadia's decision to get an abortion at the age of seventeen is also influenced by her own experience as an unplanned child. Her mother, Elise, also got pregnant at seventeen but she had Nadia and got married because that was what was expected of her. Due to this, Nadia feels stupid for having fallen into her mother's "same mistake," and carries the burden of knowing that she was her mother's limitation, imagining all the lives her mother could have had if she had decided not to have her:

> Her mother, no longer her mother, graduating from high school, from college, from graduate school even. Her mother listening to lectures or delivering her own, stationed behind a podium, running a toe up the back of her calf. Her mother travelling the world, posing on the cliffs of Santorini, her arms bent toward the blue sky. Always her mother, although in this version of reality, Nadia did not exist. Where her life ended, her mother's life began. (97)

By picturing motherhood as a limitation for women, Bennett is assigning both Nadia and her mother to the side of black women to whom motherhood is another form of oppression. Only because Nadia decides not to carry with her pregnancy, she attends and graduates from college and gets to have the life her mother could not, "This would be her life, accomplishing the things her mother had never done" (115). Nadia's story could be read as a rewriting of Gloria's storyline in *Waiting to Exhale*, both getting pregnant as teenagers by men who cannot help them, but each with a different decision.[21] Gloria subjects to the "super strong black woman" stereotype, like Mattie in *The Women of Brewster Place*. In contrast, Nadia is a contemporary woman of the twenty-first century that aims to have another type of life that does not necessarily involve motherhood, becoming a new Sula.

But as Precious in *Push*, the judgmental side in *The Mothers* comes from the church women in the Upper Room. They refer to Nadia as the "unmothered girl" for her mother's death (147), and as the "unpregnant girl" for her abortion (148), which refers to one of Luke's memories when he witnessed his father's congregation protesting in front of an abortion clinic, where a sign said, "ABORTION IS BLACK GENOCIDE" (93). Ever since the clinic started to be built, the Upper Room congregation protested for three days in front of the clinic, disgusted by the thought that, "An abortion clinic going up down-town just as easy as a donut shop" (23), while Luke's father, the Pastor, "prayed for the souls of the innocents" (23). The epitome of judgments comes in a later scene when the church mothers state that unwanted pregnancies have always happened but unlike white girls, "… we [black women] had the decency to keep our troubles" (271). Hence, the rejection of the clinic and abortion itself is not only due to religious or moral beliefs, but because abortion is seen as an adoption of white practices and a refusal to commit to the traditional motherhood expected from black women.

Through the possibility of abortion as a woman's choice or unwanted pregnancy as the result of consensual unsafe sex and not rape, Bennett outsteps the traditional narratives in twentieth-century African American fiction, such as in *The Color Purple*, *The Bluest Eye*, or *Push* among many others in which a girl's pregnancy is the outcome of rape and has no other

[21] As well, Bennett's Luke could be argued to be a contemporary update of Terry McMillan's David. In both cases they get the girl they go out with pregnant, and both are sportsmen whose future is shattered due to injuries. While "David had suffered some kind of knee injury that prevented him from becoming a professional athlete" (McMillan 76), Luke's career ended in a match: "She [Nadia], and everyone at Upper Room, had watched his promising sophomore season end last year. A routine kick return, a bad tackle, and his leg broke, the bone cutting clear through the skin. The commentators had said he'd be lucky if he walked normal again, let alone played another down, so no one had been surprised when San Diego State pulled his scholarship" (Bennett 8).

choice than to give birth. In contrast, Bennett creates a necessary story with which women with similar experiences might relate at ease while demonstrating that no one has the right to judge a woman for her life decisions. Plus, the choice of abortion goes against the stereotypical view of African American women as lazy child breeders. Nadia's choice is what guarantees her life as an independent woman with a career of her own.

3.5.2 Mothers and Othermothers

> That winter, her mother's death would be an earthquake jolting her out of sleep.
> Brit Bennett, *The Mothers*

Nadia's earthquake refers to the shattering of her life due to her mother's suicide, while Aubrey "felt at home in Nadia's motherless world" (85), since her mother did not protect her from the abuses of her boyfriend. Because of this, Bennett introduced other mother figures that will help Nadia and Aubrey, becoming their "othermothers." The main othermother figure that counterparts Nadia and Aubrey's mother is Latrice, Luke's mother. She supports Nadia's decision by giving Luke the money they need to pay for the abortion, an event that prompts her to realize she will never experience the special bond of mother-daughter relationships, "A daughter grows older and draws nearer to her mother until she gradually overlaps her like a sewing pattern. But a son becomes some irreparably separate thing" (61). The "sewing pattern" metaphor reminds of the quilt trope in African American women's writing that symbolizes the ultimate connection between women, which also highlights the mother-daughter relationship Nadia and Aubrey will never have with their biological mothers. Apart from Latrice, the church mothers emphasize the central role of black women in their community, acting as the protectors and caregivers for those in need, including Nadia after her mother's death. While Robert fails to fulfill his role as a father, the Mothers take care and feed Nadia for weeks, "She'd answered the door when the Mothers visited with food, while her father disappeared into the darkness of his bedroom" (43). These community othermothers take pride in their performance of motherhood:

> Besides, we were already mothers then, some by heart and some by womb. We rocked grandbabies left in our care and taught the neighborhood kids piano and baked pies for the sick and the shut-in. We all mothered somebody, and more than that, we all mothered. (22)

Apart from the church women and Latrice, there are two—independent—othermothers in the community, Aubrey's lesbian sister and her partner, who are seen as sexually deviant in a homophobic religious town. Monique and Kasey become othermothers first to Aubrey and

then to Nadia, who advise them to never take abortion pills like the Mexican girl, offering themselves to help them if that situation ever happens to them, "Don't ever try to do something like that on your own" (96). Like Latrice they are aware that a girl should always be helped and not forced into a dangerous situation.

The inclusion of othermothers in *The Mothers* permits Bennett to continue her exploration of the bonding between women and their networking inside the black community. But in Bennett's portrait, there is a broken network of women considering that these othermothers perform their "motherly duties" independently from each other. On the one hand, the community othermothers—the elder church women—represent the oppression black women might experience inside their communities, oppressed by traditional gender roles. On the other hand, Latrice is an example of an othermother who helps for her own benefit—to protect her son—even if it requires going against her religious morals and her husband's faith. Additionally, Monique and Kasey are the absolute "other" othermothers because of their sexuality. As it was argued in the subsection about community and sisterhood, this is again part of Bennett's portrait of a fragmented black community, while it reinforces the importance of women as mothers inside the black community.

3.6 More Stories of Domestic and Sexual Violence

> My mother says that if a man hits you once, leave. But the truth is this—my father smacked my mother across the jaw when I was six months old. She stumbled out of the room, and he sat in front of my crib and cried. She says that was the first and only time. So it happens. But you can't go around with that.
>
> Tayari Jones, *Silver Sparrow*

Twenty-first-century African American women's fiction continues to be concerned with domestic violence, just like twentieth-century novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or *The Women of Brewster Place*. As a twenty-first-century novel, *Silver Sparrow* includes diverse instances of gender violence. Mattie Mae, Gwen's best friend, was "shot to death by her boyfriend" (23), and "Monroe Bills shot his ex-wife when she was walking out of Mary Mack's" (291). Apart, Jones includes a scene of violence, from women to men. Mary attacks her boyfriend, Al Green, by throwing hot grits on him, and then she kills herself (251). [22] As

[22] This is a reference to real-life Al Green and Mary Woodson. Mary attacked her ex-boyfriend, the soul singer Al Green, when he refused to marry her by throwing hot grits on him in 1974. Jones included this reference in her novel because, "particularly in the black community in the South, that story is referenced so much" (Sweeney).

well, Gwen advises James not to shout in front of Dana, their daughter, to avoid her growing up attracted to violent men (35). In the same manner, Bennett also included instances of gender-based violence in her novels.

In *The Mothers*, Aubrey is a victim of both domestic violence and sexual violence. Paul, her mother's boyfriend, would get drunk, "and sometimes hit them but always cried about it after because he didn't mean to, his job was so stressful" (84). Yet the relevance of this violence is Aubrey's mother not caring for her daughter's well-being. Her figure as a neglecting mother connects with many other mothers who fail to protect their children like Pauline in *The Bluest* Eye, Marguerite's mother in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, even Precious' mother in *Push*. Bennett condemns this unmotherly attitude through Nadia, who feels lucky her mother would have never allowed that, making suicide look like a better option:

> In a way, Nadia almost felt lucky. At least her mother had been sick—at least she'd only tried to hurt herself. At least her mother would've never let a man hit her child. Her mother was dead, but could be worse than knowing that your mother was alive somewhere but she wanted a man who hit her more than she wanted you? (77)

The portrait of domestic violence is treated more extensively in *The Vanishing Half*. Desiree Vignes only returns to Mallard to escape her abusive husband, Sam, who falls into the topic of the "angry black man." Sam holds marginalized masculinity both for his class and social status as a working-class black man, therefore the violence he projects on his wife is the outcome of his marginalized masculinity evolving into protest masculinity in his search for power and respect. Desiree subordinates to him to help him regain his masculinity, but always being aware that her life was in jeopardy, "Who could blame him, living in a world that refused to respect him as a man?" (26). Bennett highlights Desiree's trauma by constantly recalling the physical abuses she suffered, "Hours earlier, in the middle of another argument, Sam had grabbed her by the throat and aimed his handgun at her face, his eyes as clear as the first time he'd kissed her. He would kill her someday" (16). However, Bennett refuses portraying all working-class black men as violent. This idea is opposite to Mallard's ideology, a town that directly assigns dark-skinned men such aggressiveness by taking for granted that Sam would abuse his wife because of his skin color, "Desiree went out and married the darkest boy she could find and think nobody around here knows he be putting his hands on her" (53). Bennett disapproves Mallard's color struck prejudices through the character of Early, Desiree's first teenage love. Early is Sam's counterpart because he "didn't believe in beating on women" (53), and because of this Desiree's life completely changes

once she starts a stable romantic relationship with him. After years of suffering, she finally enjoys a new life of tranquility where there were "No surprises, no sudden anger, no man holding her one moment, then hitting her the next" (92). In this sense, Bennett shows that not all black men should be prejudged as violent, while she gives light to the domestic violence black women suffer.

In her treatment of domestic violence, Bennett traces one more connection with *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Desiree thinks of the many beatings she received and realizes her light skin works like a white canvas that exposes the violence exerted on her body, "Nobody has warned her of this as a girl, when they carried on over her beautiful light complexion. How easily her skin would wear the mark of an angry man" (Bennett 50), which connects with a scene in which Sop-de-Bottom tells Tea Cake that he envies him for Janie's light skin, "You can't make no mark on 'em [dark-skinned women] at all" (Hurston 168). Apart from domestic violence, twentieth-century African American women's fiction is plagued with scenes of sexual violence, especially from fathers to daughters. Among all the novels cited, probably Sapphire's *Push* offers the most harrowing portrait of sexual violence. Without taboos, Sapphire candidly depicts the attacks while exploring the mental impact it has on the victim:

> Daddy put his pee-pee smelling thing in my mouth, my pussy, but never hold me. I see me, first grade, pink dress dirty sperm stuffs on it. No one comb my hair. Second grade, third grade, fourth grade seem like one dark night. Carl is the night and I disappear in it. (18)

Precious is molested and sexually abused by her father and mother, becomes pregnant by her father twice, and tests positive for HIV. However, sexual violence can also happen within marriage or in the streets by unknown men as Naylor shows in *The Women of Brewster Place*. While Luciella is a victim of marital rape—"the raw urges that crept, uninvited, between her thighs on countless nights" (106)—Lorraine is raped by C.C. Baker and his friend, "human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide" (197). Naylor uses Luciella and Lorraine's rapes to shows three main points. Firstly, rape is a form of oppression used to claim hegemony violently. Secondly, Lorraine's homosexuality did not protect her from the harmful side of heterosexism. And thirdly, a black woman is never safe in a hetero-patriarchal world. Following the tradition, Brit Bennett reflects upon sexual violence in both novels from two different experiences, yet both with the same message: to escape the aggressor, women need to leave the place where the attack takes place.

As mentioned before, in *The Mothers*, Aubrey is sexually assaulted by her mother's boyfriend, Paul, paralleling Marguerite's rape by Mr. Freeman in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. However, *The Mothers* does not limit the scope of sexual violence to the act itself and instead explores the trauma of sexual violence showing how it can affect a woman in her adulthood. Aubrey struggles to feel desire for her husband, Luke, or even enjoy sex because of the pain, possibly from dyspareunia caused by the trauma of her rape. The touch of men becomes unbearable, no matter the years that pass by, always with the memory of Paul coming back to her, "She felt sick, imagining Paul spreading inside of her like a virus" (209). In addition, her mother did not only not protect her from the beatings, but she allowed Paul to sexually abuse her, "And I always wondered why my mom never heard but I told myself she couldn't. Because she didn't have super senses" (145). In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella Vignes is the one sexually assaulted. She, like Elvira's daughter in *The Women of Brewster Place,* is sexually assaulted by her white boss, Mr. Dupont, an old white man no one would suspect of. He starts molesting Stella in the pantry of his house, touching her without consent, until he rapes her one day:

> She always wanted to believe that there was something special about her but she knew that Mr. Dupont only picked her because he sensed her weakness. She was the twin who wouldn't tell. And she didn't. Her whole life, she would never tell anyone. But when Desiree came up with the plan to leave after Founder's Day, Stella felt Mr. Dupont shoving her against the pantry shelf and knew she had to go too. (155)

And that is the importance of Stella's sexual assault. It is not only what encourages her to leave Mallard and run to New Orleans, but also prompts her decision to pass for white. Her marriage to Blake, apart from giving her the status of a white woman, protects her from any other sexual violence. Just like her white-passing, Mr. Dupont's abuses and rape remain a secret, not even confessing them to Desiree. All in all, Bennett deliberately includes violence against black women in both novels, either physical or sexual violence, connecting with a much-exploited theme in African American women's literature.

All things considered, the presence of sexual and domestic violence in Bennett's novels connects her fiction to that already written throughout the twentieth century, showing that African American girls and women are still experiencing the claws of patriarchy and heterosexism. Bennett reveals their vulnerability to the men inside their houses, as well as to the men from the white world with a defeatist message: there is no justice for them. Aubrey, Stella, and Desiree only "survive"—if it is possible—their attacks because they escape, saving their own lives.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has given an account of what is twenty-first-century African American literature through the study of Brit Bennett's novels *The Mothers* and *The Vanishing Half*, contextualizing her novels in the field of African American women's fiction and showing that this ethnic literature is still alive and must be further explored. The new decade is likely to see many more novels that should not be let pass. Brit Bennett's fiction exemplifies that popular literature—genre fiction—as Herman Beavers asserts, is not antonymous of high aesthetics. On the contrary, it can be considered, at least within the field of African American fiction, as a natural evolution of it; works that may and should one day become part of the literary canon. But this process is not new. Octavia Butler's speculative fiction is already part of the canon, and it should not be forgotten that the now celebrated masterpiece by Zora Neale Hurston that this study has cited so often, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was rejected by Richard Wright at the time of its publication.

Bennett accomplishes many feats with her novels. First of all, as explored above, she demonstrates that popular fiction does not equate to "low art." The richness of her fiction comes from the outstanding intertextuality and literary influences that make her stories unique. Secondly, her works are homages to canonical works written by twentieth-century African American women writers, especially Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, if we consider the constant paralleling of scenes of their works. On the broader spectrum, Bennett rewrites the tradition through the diverse themes she touches upon, including memory, motherhood, colorism, the passing narrative, and gender-based violence. Some of them are treated more conventionally, like domestic and sexual violence, and others are radical breaks from the tradition, such as turning the motherhood-based plot into one about abortion or surpassing the tragic mulatta trope. Anyhow, either more subtle or more radical, Bennett offers something new in each instance to the canon. Also, I would like to highlight that Bennett is a bestselling author, and thanks to this her novels are indirectly bringing the canon closer to the wider public while focusing attention on aspects of African American women's experience that need to be changed or at least discussed. However, Bennett is a fiction writer, and her novels should be read as such, even if they reflect upon many real-life aspects of black women's polyphonous experiences in the United States. All in all, Bennett creates contemporary stories of interest for twenty-first-century readers, that mesmerizingly talk about the past and present.

Apart from the intertextual references in Bennett's fiction, if considering once again all the patterns that Bernard W. Bell identifies in the novels written by African American women at the end of the twentieth century (242-2), Bennett fulfills at least five of the eight patterns Bell points to, which are the ones indirectly addressed throughout the analysis of her novels. Both *The Mothers* and *The Vanishing Half* center on the intersection of racist and sexist oppressions—although classist oppression is not as noticeable—(pattern 1); her novels have black female protagonists (pattern 2); both Jude and Nadia undergo a process from victimization to liberation—even if Jude is the main one—(pattern 3); exploration of female bonding is present in both novels (pattern 4); as well as a portrait of personal relationships within the family and the community (pattern 5). Hence, answering the second question proposed at the beginning of this thesis, not only is there an African American tradition in the twenty-first century, but it is also a continuation of the tradition started in the second renaissance of African American literature. All things considered, Bennett's novels can be categorized within the subgenre of neorealism.

However, this thesis has not one hundred percent answered the question of what all African American women's fiction of the twenty-first century is. As stated at the beginning of the study, it is still in its infancy and the academic world must accompany these women writers and their novels in the upcoming decades. In addition, this research has also encountered limitations, such as that of length, not being able to include all the brilliant scenes Bennett included in her novels. Therefore, in the future, both Bennett's and other authors' works should be studied both individually and following comparative analysis, also dealing with specific themes more thoroughly, to achieve a true grasp of this ethnic literature in the current century.

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