"You Cannot Escape Specters": The Hauntology of Blackness and Queer Performativities in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

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Abstract

How can feminist and queer theory inform concepts of postcolonial and Black hauntology; or, how can we queer hauntology (further)? Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020) explores practices like passing, acting, and performing as its Black characters invent new life stories to pursue more self-determined lives. I argue that their performative imaginations of alternative pasts and futures can be read as forms of queer and racialized self-representation in a segregated, racist, and queerphobic US-American society. Reading the novel through a hauntological lens exposes this setting as haunted by the continuities of slavery and segregation. Supplementing hauntology with queer, feminist, and oceanic concepts of performativity, memory, and kinship highlights not only the centrality of actively responding to the something-to-be-done signaled by hauntings but offers performative strategies that make such wake work come to life. This paper examines the representation of racial gendered hauntings in *The Vanishing Half,* its narrativization of queer modes of performativity and oceanic relationality, as well as its politics of (in)visibility.

Keywords Blackness; Haunting; Hauntology; Oceanic; Performativity; Queer; Visibility.

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Introduction

"You can escape a town, but you cannot escape blood." This assertion represents a fundamental premise of Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020), being printed already on its cover and declared in a dual voice by both the narrator and the characters living in said Louisiana smalltown which serves as the starting and end point of the narrative (7). The novel explores practices like passing, acting, and performing, as its characters invent new life stories to pursue more self-determined lives, away from the race-obsessed town founded on the ideal of lightness. I argue that the 'blood' that seems to haunt Bennett's Black characters is symbolic of a hauntology of Blackness, making visible a colonial legacy of ongoing gendered and racialized oppression and dispossession. The characters' responses to this hauntology, their imaginations of alternative pasts and futures through queer performativities, can be read as forms of self-representation in a segregated, racist, and queerphobic US-American society. Sometimes these strategies successfully lead to a sense of liberation and kinship, other times to alienation and loneliness.

As Ohad Reznick observes, "Unlike most passing novels, [...] Bennet's [sic] novel engages with the dynamics of both racial and transgender passing" (271). It thus lends itself well to an exploration of this article's underlying question: How can feminist and queer theory inform concepts of postcolonial and Black hauntology; or, how can we queer hauntology (further)? What feminist and queer theory share with Black hauntological concepts is a critique of the construction of the gendered or racialized Other as well as the imagination of alternative subjectivities, histories, and futures. On the one hand, reading with hauntology helps understand the conditions under which Bennett's characters live in the late 1960s to late 1980s as haunted by the continuities of slavery and segregation. This framework also gives reasons for why particularly Stella's attempt to repress her past fails, why she cannot escape the 'blood,' while other characters find empowerment in remembrance and reimaginings of Blackness. On the other hand, concepts like queer performativity and the oceanic unmaking of Black subjectivity highlight the centrality of actively responding to the "something-to-be-done" (Gordon xvi) signaled by hauntings with embodied practices that make wake work come to life as consciousness and care. Reading with the notion of queer oceanic kinship, moreover, underlines the relevance of attending to hauntings collectively in the aftermath of chattel slavery and a hetero-patriarchal present.

In the following, I outline basic premises of hauntological thought, relevant additions from recent, decidedly Black concepts of hauntology, and their relations to feminist and queer theories of performativity and the everyday. Then, three sections will examine the poetics of gendered racial hauntings in *The Vanishing Half*, its narrativization of modes of performativity and its politics of (in)visibility, and lastly, the role of the oceanic as productive link between queer and hauntological imaginations.

The fundamental assumption of hauntology is that the past (or future) returns to the living present as a haunting reminder of unresolved injustices that still latently influence the present. Specters signal to a "something-to-be-done" by drawing attention to "what's been in your blind spot" (Gordon xvi) due to dominant narratives of progress and selective historiog-

raphies that silence voices of the oppressed and dispossessed (cf. Benjamin, Thesis VII). This way, hauntings can generate an understanding of the connectedness of past, present, and future, and of continuities between supposedly past events or periods and the lived present. In the specific case of ongoing structural racism and dispossessions in the aftermath – or afterlife – of transatlantic slavery, we might speak of these continuities as the "wake" that has to be consciously worked through. Christina Sharpe describes such wake work as an "analytic [...] to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery" (18). It fuses practices of care with the project of remembrance and historical consciousness in order to re-actualize Black aliveness in the face of anti-Black violence and death.

Troubling ontology, historiography, and the notion of linear time by introducing the present-absent figure of the specter, hauntings can enable the imagination of alternative futures, or revolution and redemption.[1] This relies on an understanding of present power structures as historically made, continuous, but also changeable. When the "true picture of the past *whizzes* by" (Benjamin, Thesis V; original emphasis) for a fleeting moment of historical insight, the haunted are asked to reevaluate the past and, accordingly, the present (or future possibilities; Fisher, *Ghosts* 19). Thus, the project of hauntology is not nostalgic but about taking action in the present to make possible an alternative future, thereby breaking with capitalist realism (Fisher) or "political paralysis" (Gordon 182). However, the precondition for hauntings to fulfill their transformative potential is the hospitality and openness of the haunted. Openness is necessary since specters challenge conventional ways of thinking and address troubling issues like unresolved collective trauma and injustices.

Building upon Jacques Derrida's original hauntology developed in *Specters of Marx* (1994) and Avery F. Gordon's discussion of hauntings in racial gendered capitalism in the United States (*Ghostly Matters* 1997), Kashif Jerome Powell develops a concept appropriate for analyzing the legacy of transatlantic slavery in the United States and its impact on Black Americans today. In *Specters and Spooks* (2014), Powell not only analyzes the impact of slavery's continuities on Black bodies but also explores different modes of performativity, namely theater performances and street protests, as ways of reimagining and performing self-determined meanings of Blackness in opposition to the dominant and dominating "ontological imaginings" of it (*Making #BlackLivesMatter* 254). Through chattel slavery, the perception as well as performances of Blackness have become "traced through both existence and nonexistence" (*Specters* 2), so that it appears as lacking subjectivity and intertwined with death. Understanding Blackness as being haunted by the sociocultural, political, and economic consequences of slavery is another perspective highlighting the continuity of systematic racial oppression and exploitation. Being haunted by what Powell calls "the spectral trace of slavery" means to live, as Black Americans, in "a forced relationship with a historized imagining of *blackness* as/in death" (17; original emphasis), which manifests both on a material and discursive level. Besides describing ongoing racial violence in the wake, Powell's hauntology attests that Black bodies have been rendered ghostly themselves, occupying a spectralized position between life and death. Thus, hauntings affect at least two dimensions as Black Americans are haunted by exterior specters and are spectralized themselves. This also relates to Gordon's

claim that hypervisibility can entail invisibility (*Ghostly Matters* 17), and it parallels the problem of national memory in the aftermath of slavery: While the material Blackness of the body has become hypervisible as a deviation from the norm and loaded with meaning, the history of institutionalized racial oppression and exploitation underlying this imagination of Blackness has been made invisible. Simultaneously, whiteness has also been made invisible by rendering it universal (Powell, *Specters* 27; Hartman, *Scenes* 154).

However, theater and street protests are locations where "fundamental conditions of possibility [appear] that haunt those performativities" (Powell, *Specters* 3) and that can affectively challenge dominant imaginations of Blackness. Those who actively remember can act as surrogates, giving "afterlives" (9) to the dead and enabling their spirits to reappear as specters. In that way, performances of remembrance can be not only a form of redemption for the past, but can "disrup[t] and reconfigur[e] the phenomenal existence of *blackness*" (15; original emphasis) in the present and for the future. Powell later expands on the idea that, like in theater performances, protesters at demonstrations act simultaneously as "the witness[es], [and] as the *revenant*[s]" (*Making #BlackLivesMatter* 40; original emphasis), thus being haunted and haunting at the same time. The transformative potential of hauntings sensed in such performativities can partly be attributed to the affective character of hauntings, as Gordon describes: "Being haunted draws us affectively [...] into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (8). Firstly, this points out how hauntings make accessible and relatable the insights they offer. Secondly, identifying the structure of feeling as "perhaps the most appropriate description of how hauntings are transmitted and received" (18) elevates the impact of hauntings from individual experience to the collective level. They are able to "mediat[e] between institution and person" (142). Therefore, hauntology allows for the examination of narrations that relate individual encounters with specters to collective memory and trauma, as well as for the identification of hauntings within memory politics and hegemonic discourses.

Like Gordon, Patricia Yaeger firmly emphasizes a dimension of hauntings that is already discernible in Powell's work: their situatedness in the everyday. Yaeger's notion of racial gendered hauntings brings in a feminist and queer theoretical perspective that productively informs postcolonial and Black hauntologies. Advocating for this focus on the everyday in *Dirt and Desire* (2000), Yaeger writes that the trivial should not be separated from the historical, thus echoing the core feminist premise that the personal is political. Her analyses underline that everyday practices are shaped by and shaping (memory) politics, so that, conversely, the everyday can be a "source of social change [...and] daily resistances" (154). As argued by Gordon, the accessibility of affective and mundane, and thus more tangible, experiences of haunting can increase their impact as it facilitates decoding their message. Centering the ordinary dimension of hauntings also underlines the fact that experiences of gendered and racialized oppression are not extraordinary but, on the contrary, systemic and made every day. The pervasiveness of oppressive power structures then becomes especially clear when narratives situate them in mundane settings or the supposedly safe space of the home.

Conceptualizing a hauntology for southern women's fiction simultaneously marks Yaeger's attempt to move away from an academic focus on Gothic texts. She criticizes directing academic attention predominantly at the southern Gothic and its portrayal of monstrous excesses for overshadowing "a repetitive structure in southern fiction that depends on the trace or remnant—on a scrap that, in its most raveled state, still conjures the unthought of history" (Yaeger, Ghosts 104-05). Pointing out mundane objects and ordinary language as mediums of racial haunting, Yaeger argues that specters materialize in the form of remnants, traces, scraps of fabric, hair, and overall small fragments. While the "mundane links black and white fiction" (98), the content of the hauntings differs significantly; they display "different hauntologies and [...] structures of feeling" (101). White southern women's fiction narrates "*the return of the oppressed*" (95; original emphasis), or how ghosts are repressed into disappearance again. In these texts, hauntings remain vague illusions and only hint at haunting "relations of dominance that will not disappear" (101). Those are, however, still disturbing to the white characters exactly because they remain latent. This form of haunting can be described as uncontrollable, "pure repetition" (Brogan 9), so that "even the ghost of an insight is not recognizable" (Yaeger, *Ghosts* 102) and the haunted subject cannot act upon it in the present.

By contrast, Black southern women's fiction depicts mundane objects, scraps, and remnants as means through which the dead and dispossessed can "return as a remnant or fragment that needs to be made into an integer" (Yaeger, Ghosts 102) in a haunting "*return of the dispossessed*" (95; original emphasis) initiated by the gathering of such remains. Besides making visible again the fragmentation through loss of kin, memory, and subjectivity in the wake, their reappearance imagines an alternative "world-that-would-be" (96). This powerful poetics of the everyday and its "obsession with scraps" (92) can also be attributed to the importance remnants held for the enslaved in the antebellum South when, for instance, the "lock of [a mother's] hair" (95) or a relative's name was the only (physical) connection to people lost to death or after being sold.

In line with Yaeger's advocacy for studying the ordinary and "quiet" (*Ghosts* 101) hauntings of race, Philomena Essed contends that "[e]veryday racism is not about extreme incidents" (204) but about the repetition of "routine" and "cumulative" (208) racist practices. Her elaborations on everyday racism support the emphasis that Black, feminist, and queer theories place on the mundane in order to balance out "'grand'" (204) narratives of institutionalized discrimination by adding and relating the micro to the macro perspective.[2] A recourse to feminist and queer concepts of performativity and kinship will allow us to further tease out the meaningfulness of mundane scraps in Bennett's story of gendered racial hauntings.

Traveling Specters, or a Not So Southern Hauntology of Blackness

Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* (*VH*) tells the story of twin sisters whose lives split in adolescence, so that their families and daughters do not know about the other until much later. Stella and Desiree Vignes, born 1938, grow up in a Louisiana small town founded on the ideal of lightness. Despite their light complexion, the Vignes are a Black family and father Leon gets lynched, resulting in the young girls and their mother Adele having to work hard to make

a living. The twins leave Mallard at sixteen, but Desiree returns at thirty with daughter Jude while Stella leads a new life passing as a white woman in California with husband Blake and daughter Kennedy. Only through Jude's move to California and a chance encounter do the two family strands eventually reconnect. The narrative is structured into six parts, beginning in 1968 with Desiree's return and ending in 1986 with the reunion of the twins and Adele's death, thus spanning the (post-)civil rights decades. As Marcus notes, though, the "key events" (366) of that history remain in the background and seemingly do not influence the characters' hauntedness or their responses to it.

The story is narrated by a heterodiegetic third person narrator with, for the most part, variable internal focalization. The four primary focalizers are Desiree, Stella, Jude, and Kennedy. Occasionally, the perspectives of others, like Early or Adele, are told in shorter passages. Sometimes the focalization changes to zero when the narrative voice adds its own commentary or tells more than the characters could know. Chapters, moreover, jump back and forth in time and include flashforwards or -backwards that contextualize certain scenes or represent processes of remembrance.

Comparing the four characters, all of them are haunted by ghosts of Blackness and segregation but they respond markedly differently and represent distinct practices of remembrance and strategies to overcome the hauntings. While the narrative voice exerts relatively little control over speech presentation, Free Indirect Thought causes an "indeterminacy" regarding whose thoughts are presented so that "narratorial and character voices" (Simpson 21) seem to blend. This results in the characters' thoughts and feelings seeming validated and understandable. Considering the vast differences between the four protagonists' opinions and lifestyles, the narrator's apparent proximity to each of them allows for identification with all four and suggests that there is no clear right or wrong in their decisions, or at least, that they are all comprehensible.

Stella is haunted by the traumatic memory of her father's lynching and her own sexual abuse, as well as by the historically shaped meaning of Blackness as consequence of her experiences of racism. She chooses to repress and hide her family history and Blackness by passing as white but the hauntings still continue in various forms. By contrast, adult Desiree reclaims her identity as a Black woman, marrying "the darkest man she could find" (VH 5) and refusing to cover her dark-skinned daughter in neutral colors (43). Leon's death makes Desiree reject her hometown's and ancestors' ideal of lightness, perceiving it as a dangerous legacy "clawing at her throat" (14). At the same time, she confronts the past by moving back to her family home in Mallard. The intertext that Desiree's return recalls, canonical US-American author Kate Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby" (1893), further underscores her re-imagination of Blackness: On a Louisiana plantation, white Désirée Aubigny discovers that her newborn baby is Black. Her husband Armand, a severe slave-owner, therefore rejects her, believing that she must be secretly Black. Désirée ultimately drowns herself and the baby in the nearby river instead of turning to her supportive mother. Armand later learns that not his wife but his own mother was Black. In *The Vanishing Half*, Desiree Vignes subverts this story about racial anxieties and miscegenation by sharing the protagonist's name but actively choosing to have

a child with a Black man, who indeed punishes her for her lightness. She then returns to her mother for safety, and Mallard's river serves as a guide toward home rather than a place of death (cf. *VH* 18; Yaeger, *Dirt* 43). This homecoming at the beginning of the novel thus already hints at the importance of oceanic kinship and mother-daughter relationships for resisting the hauntology of Blackness. While Bennett's novel breaks with its intertext regarding the two Desirees's contrary attitudes toward Blackness (one haunted by it, one reclaiming it) and by depicting Desiree Vignes as having the agency and power to leave her abusive husband, the two texts share the figure of a violent husband obsessed with race, as well as the image of "remnant[s]" (Chopin 244) triggering racial hauntings.

In the next generation, Desiree's daughter Jude is haunted by specters of Blackness, resulting in feelings of not belonging, emotional abuse by schoolmates, and attempts to lighten or cover up her dark skin. Despite growing up white, Stella's daughter Kennedy shares feelings of not belonging or not being loved and suffers nightmares about lynchings, which suggests that she inherited Stella's traumatic memories in the sense of a postmemory (Hirsch).[3] Thus, although Kennedy enjoys the privileges of being born white and wealthy, she too is unknowingly affected by racial hauntings. Simultaneously, however, she reproduces the racism she learns from Stella. When learning about her Black ancestors through Jude, she reflects upon her own identity and upbringing, trying to rearticulate what Blackness or whiteness mean and realizing the interwovenness of identity, performativity, and socialization.

Hauntings mostly center around the two overarching topics of (loss of) kinship, and Blackness in the novel. They manifest as nightmares and constant unease, or as resurfacing memories triggered by everyday objects. Stella and Kennedy experience nightmares resulting from the traumatic (post-)memory of Leon's lynching and feel like they do not belong to their family and community in Palace Estates, Los Angeles. While Stella's anxiety is grounded in her fear of revealing that she grew up Black and poor and thus being rejected by her family, Kennedy's self-consciousness stems from Stella being distanced and secretive toward her. These haunting memories of familial loss and danger, which can be traced back to the legacy of slavery in Mallard, resurface because of their racist white neighbors in California. Likewise, for Desiree living in the family home, everyday objects once used by Stella, like a doll or chair, conjure ghostly images of young Stella appearing around the house or on the way to school. For both twins, scraps and remains enable a return of father Leon and memories of his funeral. Having been dispossessed of his life, memories of Leon come up "in flashes," being recalled by his "denim shirt" (37) or woodwork. Making her remember sensations and tastes from the day of Leon's funeral, a black lacey fabric and a photograph taken at the service affectively haunt Stella decades later, not so much as a welcome return but as an otherwise repressed memory of loss. As this loss stretches beyond the lifespan of her father whose "lineage [was already] hollowed by loss" (35), the narrative exposes the ongoing structural violence in the aftermath of slavery.

Specters of Blackness as conceptualized by Powell manifest when Stella is haunted by Blackness as a shameful secret that she desperately tries to conceal and repress, as well as when she experiences oppressive performances of whiteness – most drastically in the

forms of Leon's lynching and sexual abuse by former boss Mr. Dupont. Through passing and moving to California, she attempts to avoid this hauntology that forces her into an abusive workplace, hinders the pursuit of higher education, and makes her rely on the "Negro Day" (155) to visit a museum. But her repression is unsuccessful: Beginning with the Walkers' (a Black family) move to Palace Estates, she feels "bad luck" (165) enters the neighborhood and her anxiety increases. Later, upon meeting Jude, the picture of "that dark girl" (273) repeatedly haunts her imagination. Moreover, Stella's memories of racial and sexual violence are triggered by Blake's and Kennedy's whiteness, which again shows the disturbing effect of resurfacing traumatic memories that are repressed instead of worked through. In a seemingly contradictory but ultimately consistent process, Stella performs the white supremacist actions that made her seek out a life without racial violence in the first place. For instance, she repeats to Kennedy what she herself, as a child, heard a white mother say – "'we don't play with niggers'" (173; 211) – out of fear of exposing herself as not belonging in the white neighborhood.

Linguistically, these hauntings manifest through contrasts of Blackness and whiteness, spatio-temporal deixis, and modality. The flashing up of memory is narrated using terms connoting hauntings either in a positive or negative sense, like "conjured" (80), "invisible remnants" (96), "ghost[s]" (226, 262), or "appearing" (223, 325). Oftentimes, the haunted characters feel disturbed, "choked" (275), or "spooked" (296) by memories. Ultimately, however, they all begin to imagine different lives as the hauntings disrupt their perceptions of reality. One scene that vividly captures the capability of disruption possessed by a haunting "scrap of paper" (296) narrates how Jude hands Kennedy a photograph of their mothers and shared grandmother. Markers of perception modality describe the affective impact on focalizer Kennedy and her creation of a countermemory (cf. Simpson 46). Simultaneously, Kennedy realizes there is something to be done: confronting Stella about not telling her the truth about her life story. The narrative voice affirms memory's multidirectionality in this scene, describing how it points "forward and backward at the same time" (*VH* 307). The photograph mirrors this ambivalence as it first feels like "a razor, digging into [Kennedy's] side" (297), until it changes into a source of stability that she needs "to tether her in place" (311). Thus, after the initial disturbance, this scrap provides a countermemory for Kennedy that, although challenging to her identity, is experienced as liberating because it connects her to a family history and sense of belonging hitherto unknown.

Blackness and whiteness are constantly contrasted through repeated connections drawn between Blackness and notions of danger, arrogance, and beasts, and between lightness and freedom and success. Thereby, the persistent hauntology of Blackness, experienced and reproduced by the focalizers and their communities, is emphasized throughout the novel. Particularly Jude's dark skin is highlighted and insulted by Mallard's inhabitants, calling her "blueblack" (63), "tar baby" (88), or "vulgar" (43). In Mallard and L.A. alike, Blackness is regarded as bringing "trouble" (63), being "ugly" and "queer" (202), even possibly "[d]angerous" (172), "alarming" (173), or connected to "[s]omething wild and feral" (205). Moreover, ecologies of death surrounding Blackness are linguistically invoked by linking Black-

ness to violent death, for example with expressions like "lynched" (35), "assassination," "victims" (188), or "gutted" (202). When Black characters like Desiree, the Walkers, and Frantz do not conform to this episteme that confines them to a subservient, precarious, or segregated position, they are judged as "crazy" (63) and, above all, as "[f]lashy" (172) and "uppity" (23). By contrast, lightness is mostly viewed as desirable by Black characters, judged to be "more perfect" (6), granting "good fortune" (318) and the repeatedly mentioned privilege of being "free" (64, 341, 22). Only Stella and the omniscient narrative voice associate lightness also with loneliness, a feeling most sharply conveyed through the use of deixis.

Markers of spatial and temporal deixis, i.e. of the perceived proximity or distance, serve to express the characters' feelings of alienation from other characters, places, or life stages. Apart from indicating distance between two points in time or space, deictic verbs and locative expressions combined with metaphors also articulate the liminal positions created in slavery and reverberating through hauntings: not belonging, living between whiteness and Blackness, or between life and death, love and mistrust. For instance, the distance felt by Stella toward her past is expressed through thoughts like "that was a lifetime ago" (162), or her perception of the past as "another life" closed off behind a "door" (266). Simultaneously, since Stella lies to Kennedy and recognizes the difference between her daughter's 'real' whiteness and her own performed one, their relationship is described in similarly distant terms: her daughter appears as "a stranger" (245, 275). Besides this felt distance, there is also a physical distance that Stella maintains. When Jude intentionally meets her and "reache[s] toward Stella," her aunt "push[es] her away" (267). The pushing and pulling illustrate clearly Jude and Stella's opposing desires of contact versus avoidance. Similarly, Stella's fear of exposure as a Black woman makes her (initially) keep as much physical and emotional distance to the Walkers as possible, watching them only "[t]hrough her blinds, […] as if their lives were another program on her television set," from "across the street" (173). Generally, descriptions of characters watching others through objects like mirrors, cameras, or blinds are a recurrent motif illustrating the disjunction between appearance and identity. All these scenes narrate how the 'true' self cannot be seen even by loved ones when the other one masks it. This motif will be further explored in relation to queer(ing) practices and performativities later.

Furthermore, spatial deixis expresses Stella's ghostliness which results from the repeated dehumanization and dispossession of her and her Black family, and is then intensified through her passing and separation from Desiree. Her uprootedness is indicated by Blake referring to her as someone "who came from nowhere and had nobody" (201). Jude's imagination also locates her "everywhere, always, and nowhere at the same time" (224), "slipping in and out of doors," and "drift[ing] through her dreams" (222). It is an unstable, hard-to-grasp image illustrating Stella's presence-absence, which matches Stella's own perception. The liminal position Stella occupies through repressing her past and having to constantly perform being white is further underlined by Kennedy's reverse alienation from Black persons, and Stella's struggle to adapt to another, wealthy white habitus. Both aspects are illustrated by distal deixis and references to unfamiliarity. Being raised white in a segregated neighborhood, Kennedy grows up with a distanced relationship particularly to "black boys

she'd admired from afar," from a "[s]afe" distance (289, emphasis mine). Therefore, when she later learns about the Black side of her family, she searches for connectedness but feels none, instead feeling only "alienated" (292). Stella's secret passing and hauntedness thus result in a sense of spectralization of herself as well as of Kennedy. Her daughter becomes a "lonely girl [...] surrounded only by ghosts" (262) and struggles to pinpoint her identity following Jude's revelation. Kennedy resorts to jobs that involve acting and pretending as a strategy to avoid resolving the seemingly unresolvable gap between growing up white and knowing her mother is Black.

Considering the strategies characters employ to deal with the various hauntings, it can be observed that the hauntings either encourage remembrance and engagement with the specters or their repression. The characters' choices are framed primarily through their desire for closeness or distance to family and other Black characters. Desiree and, to some degree, Kennedy seek close relationships with Black characters like their respective partners Sam, Early, and Frantz, or childhood friend Cindy. Whereas Desiree and Jude are determined to find Stella and reunite the family, Stella avoids contact with Black characters out of fear of being recognized for who she really is. For instance, Stella prefers to hire a Mexican housekeeper over a Black person and avoids eye contact with Black people in public.

However, Stella's relationship to neighbor Loretta is more complex, displaying both attempts of repression and a desire for an alternative life. As their relationship moves from initial aloofness to friendship and imagined kinship to separation and grief on the part of Stella, its development demonstrates simultaneously a return of the repressed and of the dispossessed. The middle stage is defined by frequent meetings and Stella's wish to reveal her secret, which she imagines might lead to Loretta recognizing her as kin, so that Stella could finally experience a sense of belonging again and relieve her guilt. A return of the dispossessed takes place when the image of Desiree is conjured by the likeness of Loretta's gestures to hers, as well as through the space for reflection and remembrance that Loretta empathically creates. In an instance of linguistic slippage, Stella expresses her affection to Loretta by calling her "'baby'" (187), thus extending Yaeger's concept of linguistic ghosts to include the resurfacing of repressed Black kinship. The sentence ending this scene, "[t]hen she [Stella] was kneeling on the tile, cleaning up the mess she'd made" (187), shows Stella's guilt toward Loretta in a seemingly documentary style. But as it was Loretta who let a glass fall and shatter, the literal mess was made by her not Stella, who nevertheless cleans it up. This "mess" recalls Stella's involvement in the neighborhood's racism against the Walkers, which was the previous conversation topic, and thus complicates her spontaneous affectionate gesture.

Indeed, notwithstanding Stella's fondness of Loretta, their relationship is framed by a return of the repressed in the form of racist statements. Stated initially by Stella, the phrase "we don't play with niggers" (173) returns when Kennedy utters it to Loretta's daughter in childish rage. The racism inherent in Stella's performance of whiteness, repressed when together with Loretta, thus resurfaces to haunt Stella as a reminder of her complicity in reproducing an anti-Black climate. Eventually, her allegation that Reg Walker looked at her inappropriately – a claim the narrator exposes as a lie – makes neighbors threaten the Black

family with attacks on their house, so that they move out. Their move hinders Stella from repressing her abuse of white power and generates another haunting of the repressed when she imagines finally explaining herself to Loretta. However, this fantasy is not relieving as Loretta's anger and misery haunt it, reminding Stella to take responsibility for her actions.

Clearly, the success of characters' revisions of their racialized and gendered self-representations prompted by hauntings neither corresponds to a North/South divide nor is it guaranteed by mobility. While mobility shapes several characters' lives as they move across the country to escape specters or build new lives for themselves, settling elsewhere or moving north does not necessarily resolve their hauntedness. As underscored by spatial deixis, Stella encounters racist violence and segregation in her suburban California neighborhood just as she did in rural Louisiana, while Desiree moves back to Mallard from Washington, D.C., to escape her abusive husband and finds belonging and kinship there. For Jude and partner Reese, by contrast, moving to L.A. from Louisiana and Arkansas, respectively, enables them to find liberating self-representations and to build queer Black community. What seems to be most conducive to them creating freer and safer lives is thus not the ability to move but rather forms of wake work that include re-embracing and re-imagining Blackness as well as queer practices of kinship.

"I Want to See You": Politics of (In)Visibility and Queer Performativities

Strategic pretending, acting, or passing make up another prominent theme and response to being haunted by specters in *The Vanishing Half*. Desiree has acted in school, and for Early, Kennedy, and Reg acting is (part of) their job. Stella and Reese both perform different identities to the ones they grew up with in order to lead new lives as a white woman and transman, respectively, and several of Reese's friends, including Barry, perform in drag shows.[4] While the frequent narration of pretending demonstrates the characters' sense of ghostliness, instability, and fear of exposure, they also experience these performances as liberating. Kennedy's convincing acting, for instance, is described as a process of "disappear[ing] inside herself" (319) or "into somebody else" (283). In a dual voice, the narrator and Kennedy reflect on how "[a]cting is not about being seen […] True acting mean[s] becoming invisible" (283). Assuming invisibility by choice thus becomes an act of reclaiming control over one's performances of identity in a situation marked by presence-absence. Indeed, acting (on stage or in front of a camera) is simultaneously a hypervisible practice as the actors' voice, gestures, or facial expressions are emphasized through the use of lights, microphones, or close shots. Kennedy, however, foregrounds the disappearance of the own personality through acting.

Likewise, "Voudon inflected performances" (*Specters* 111) at "racial phantasmagoria" (112) shows of seemingly race-shifting mulattas in mid-nineteenth-century Louisiana, Powell argues, gave the performers "autonomy by using the simultaneous legibility and illegibility of [their] body to create a space of possibility" (111-12). Since Kennedy's sense of identity is troubled she appreciates the control provided by the fact that "'acting is different […] You only show people what you want to'" (*VH* 257). Despite her growing up white, Kennedy shows a form of postmemory as she, too, experiences unease at being recognized unwillingly and

off-stage for the role she plays as an actress. Clearly, she reproduces the paranoid behavior that Stella has adopted since passing. For Kennedy, acting therefore is a strategy of regaining self-determination and a welcome escape from other people's categorizing gaze, a gaze that produces hyper- and invisibility at the same time.

Unlike Kennedy, Stella and Reese perform their new identities permanently, which requires a higher degree of control and secrecy and heightens their fear of exposure. Still, they also experience agency through performance, perceiving it as a controllable act of self-invention. However, the self-empowering quality of passing and transitioning is contrasted with the frequently mentioned danger of being unmasked. Their desire for control and considering what is at stake socially and economically makes the thought of someone learning about their old lives unsettling. A sense of danger is evoked by expressions such as "get caught" (13) or "dangerous" (74), and by Stella almost injuring herself severely when remembering her first successful passing. This is additionally emphasized by the repeated accounts of Stella hiding in her house and Reese in darkness or behind his camera, and particularly by both of them shielding their bodies from views that might reveal their secrets. As Stella and Reese adopt markedly similar strategies against the unwanted exposure of their bodies and past identities, the text narrates how both Stella as a Black woman and Reese as a Black transman are haunted by the forms of violence and rejection they have encountered in a white supremacist, patriarchal society. It illustrates how racialized and gendered oppression overlap or combine as part of colonialism's structural legacy (cf. Powell, *Specters* 27; Ibrahim 174).

Still, the novel does not suggest that similar anxieties surrounding visibility automatically lead to mutual understanding when focusing only on either race or gender. On the same day within the narrative, Jude is uneasy about her dark skin being (hyper-)visible in the sunshine at Venice Beach, but asks Reese to stop obscuring his not yet surgically transformed body in darkness at home. Jude's "'I want to see you'" is rejected by Reese's "'I don't want you to'" (132); and this brief dialog reflects the general conflict over the power to see and thus identify, classify, and potentially dominate that is presented in the novel. These politics of (in)visibility are relevant not only because they enable or undermine self-determined performances of identity, but because having control over the perception of others encompasses the power to decide who is human and whose lives are expendable in racial gendered capitalism. Repeated descriptions of light and dark spaces that expose or conceal skin tones and queer practices or gender identities on the one hand signal to the characters' shared desire to control their visibility. On the other hand, the emphasis on light and darkness highlights the obsession with Blackness and whiteness shaping the society portrayed by Bennett.

Apart from the narrativization of practices of concealing and masking, characters watch (or are watched by) others through mirrors, which reflects on the mediation of gender and race, the role of the audience, as well as on the troubling effects that passing can have in contrast to acting. Two scenes in which the reader 'watches' Barry (Jude's and Reese's friend and a Black drag queen) and Stella, respectively, through mirrors and thus only indirectly through a mediating object, convey the gaps between their self-understanding and the roles they perform in front of others. It becomes clear that their audiences – Barry's audience at

drag shows and Stella's family – can only ever see them from a certain distance controlled by the performers. In Barry's case, the transformation of gender overlaps with a transformation of race when he performs "as Bianca at a club in West Hollywood [tellingly] called Mirage. […] 'It's not enough to be a woman,' Reese had joked during the show. 'He's gotta be a white woman too'" (114-15). Temporarily and playfully, Barry thus mocks and escapes from the patriarchal white gaze scrutinizing him as a gay Black man in his daily life.

The mediated nature of his performance is further underlined by descriptions of his preparations for the show: Jude watches him get ready through a mirror and sees that "[o]ne cheek was covered in full makeup, the other half of his face still clean" (119). Then, "right before a performance […] a veil seemed to drop before his face. One moment he was Barry, the next, Bianca" (231; my emphasis). While the makeup is part of the transformation, his acting provides the veil that changes how others perceive Barry. The attention drawn to characters' physical appearances altered through makeup, the surfaces mediating them, and performance emphasizes that a supposedly stable identity and norms, what Judith Butler refers to as "'the internal' is a surface signification" actively upheld by the "*stylized repetition of acts*" (179; emphasis in original). Barry's transformation thus destabilizes the "mediating boundary [distinguishing the hegemonic and the Other, and the body's internal and external] that strives for stability" (170), blurring the boundaries between both gender and racial identities on stage. Narrating how character physically, medially, and performatively alter (the perception of) their bodies, the novel breaks with the hegemonic "construction of stable bodily contours" (169) and the notion of coherence between body, identity, and performance. Lastly, not only does Barry's half-painted face illustrate the fact that race and gender are continuously constructed, it also picks up the motif of the doubled or split body, which I will return to with regard to Stella.

The crucial difference between her and Barry, though, is that Stella is passing continuously in order to survive while Barry is acting for entertainment purposes on "two Saturdays a month in a tiny dark club off Sunset. [And thus, again, a character acts in the safety of the dark.] Otherwise, he was a tall, bald man who looked nothing like a woman, which was part of the delight […]. *It was fun because everyone knew that it was not real*" (115; my emphasis). By contrast, when Stella "glance[s] at him [Blake] through the mirror, Blake watching her with those soft, worried eyes," she thinks "She'd created a new life with a man *who could never know her*" (208; my emphasis). Barry and Stella thus represent the difference between acting and passing, which can be drawn out further with the help of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of queer performativity and the peri-performative, or context of performativity. At heart lies a question about their audiences' knowledge: "does the audience know that it is an audience?" (Edwards 88); and further: how does the audience respond to the performance? Clearly, Barry's/Bianca's audience at the drag show is fully aware of watching an artistic performance. Stella's family and neighbors, however, must not know since her passing is a secret whose exposure might lead to the loss of her family, socio-economic status, and safety. In fact, her white and clearly racist neighbors do show "an interest in sanctioning against" (89) the Blackness she tries to conceal. While her audi-

ence is unknowing, it is thus still a vital part to her performance because "[s]he had become white only because everyone thought she was" (VH 198). Regardless of whether a performance is temporary, like drag shows, or potentially permanent, like passing, performativity involves an opposite who accepts the performance as believable (cf. also Butler 180).

Still, regarding Stella's audience, the risk of exposure and subsequent punishment leads to frequent expressions of anxiety such as "[s]he couldn't let herself slip up like that again. She'd have to focus. Stay alert" (VH 273), underlining the risk Stella knowingly takes to evade racist violence and dispossession. Indeed, Black characters who are economically successful or behave as entitled as whites do are repeatedly labeled as "uppity" (23) and are punished for allegedly appropriating something they are not allowed to have. The Walkers, for instance, are able to buy themselves into Brentwood's wealthy white neighborhood but are violently driven out again for their Blackness. Importantly, alternative performances that go "undetected" (Edwards 79) do not automatically challenge societal conventions. Therefore, the kind of performance and its context decide whether it can become subversive (Butler 177). However, the function and effect of "self-styled" performances is never entirely self-determined as "styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities" (177). In other words, the potentials of Stella's passing are shaped by the historical material conditions of late 1960s United States, so that her performance remains an exclusively personal and confined attempt at overcoming anti-Black violence. Still, the narrative problematizes her strategy by showing how it encompasses her own reproduction of racist acts.

Despite similar means of narrating Stella's passing, Reese's gender transformation, and Barry's drag performance, only Stella experiences spectralization and continues to be haunted by specters of Blackness despite passing successfully – and arguably even more because of it. The troubling consequence of her decision to pass is that she feels split in half. Like Stella, Barry also thinks of his drag persona as a part of him, but he manages to feel in control of his separate roles:

> Barry prided himself on his ability to keep his lives separate. […] He was Bianca on two Saturday nights a month, and otherwise, he pushed her out of sight, even though he thought about her […] Bianca always lingering on the edge of his mind. […] You could live a life this way, *split*. *As long as you knew who was in charge*. (VH 135; my emphasis)[5]

But unlike Stella, Barry does not pretend to be someone else out of a haunting trauma. Stella's problem is losing the desired control over her life because she cannot escape the specters of Blackness and is haunted by returns of the repressed: For her, "pretending became reality. […] She'd lived a life split between two women—each real, each a lie" (278). Passing is thus presented as a deeply ambiguous, as well as dangerous performance. While Stella chooses to pass as white in order to escape the ecologies of death, the act of passing is portrayed as splitting her in half and associated with death: "Maybe Miss Vignes was already a part of her, as if she had been split in half" (199). The motif of the split, moreover, is both

common in southern fictions of the grotesque and in narratives of transatlantic slavery and its afterlife, thus encompassing the individual dimension of split personalities or bodies as well as the collective dimension of family trees, communities, and collective memories being torn apart by the slave trade and ongoing anti-Black violence. The fact that characters cannot outrun the(ir) past is not so much proof of the existence of any 'original' identity derived from a stable body but rather demonstrates the limitations that historical material conditions place on attempts to rethink identity through a "perpetual displacement" and "fluidity" in performance that "denaturalize[s]" (Butler 176) any stable notions. Especially Barry's and Stella's sense of always being and shifting between two racial and gender identities exemplifies Butler's argument that identity performances are always imitations without an original.

These splitting conditions are mirrored in the narrative structure and by the embodiment of splits in characters' bodies, minds, and families as they feel spectralized, torn between identities, or separated from kin. Yaeger identifies the split as typical of southern hauntological and Gothic writing, in which bodies are oftentimes "twinned" and "divided in half: split between white and black [...,] incorporating the line of segregation itself" (Dirt 31). In later fictions, "hybridized bodies often separate into two distinct but interconnected characters" (32), as is the case with Desiree and Stella. The metaphor TWIN SISTERS ARE TWO PARTS OF A WHOLE is frequently evoked with the effect of highlighting spectrality and loss as characteristic of Blackness in the wake. Desiree and Stella are viewed as "one person split into two bodies" (VH 37) and always as a "pair" (39), so that their separation appears particularly drastic. Stella even doubly embodies this split through her passing as white, feeling torn in half. This fissure is moreover reflected on the novel's cover,[6] which shows two faces – one light, one dark – that overlap but face different directions, signaling to their simultaneous connectedness and separation.

From a Black hauntological perspective, Stella's embodiment of presence-absence represented by her sense of being unreal, invisibly split in two, or lacking is testament to the spectralization of Black bodies and subjectivity in the wake (cf. Coly 115; Sharpe 28-29). As Powell argues, in "the institution of slavery [...] blackness signified a body politically and socially devoid of lineage, and lacking the ontological capacity for life" (Specters 7). As Stella tries to flee this legacy, she actually denounces her family and feels stuck in a liminal position between a past she cannot repress and an alternative future she cannot fully embrace. Indeed, passing not only confirms Stella's notion of being split, but it is presented in relation to death: "the *passe blanc* were a mystery. You could never meet one who'd passed over undetected, the same way you'd never know someone who successfully faked her own death" (VH 74). Therefore, passing is not presented as a successful strategy for escaping the hauntology of Blackness. Repressing her past and abandoning her Black family constrains Stella to a "cemented" (242) liminality rather than allowing her to move on. When Jude finds and confronts her, saying "'My mama kept looking for you,' [...] Stella's mouth curved, like she was going to smile or cry, her face, somehow, caught in between. Like a sun shower" (266). Even her appearance, then, mirrors the spectralized and torn position Stella finds herself in.

Another strategy paralleling the performance of alternative identities is Mallard's re-narrativization of the role of Black people in the South. Being a "third place" (*VH* 6), its in-betweenness is a strategy employed by the town's founder, a former slave, to achieve self-determination and belonging. However, while the town is characterized as "more idea than place" (5) and thus moldable, defying stable notions of history or identity, it is still haunted by the colonial past (54). Mallard's townspeople participate in a form of "postcolonial conscription" (Coly 28) of the Black American body: They follow the ideal of lightness, "nobody marrie[s] dark" (*VH* 5), and adhere to segregationist rules like separate days for museum visits. Lingering traces of slavery haunt, for example, the description of Jude's date with white classmate Lonnie: "the night hung heavy and damp like soaked cotton. She tasted the sugar off his lips" (114). The scenery is illustrated with references to two crops typical of southern plantations, cotton and sugar cane, thus hinting at the continuities of racial oppression that determine Jude's relationship with Lonnie. Moreover, the fact that Mallard is an "unmapped place" (85), invisible and unthinkable to other Americans and particularly to white people (6), highlights the invisibility of Black subjectivity that renders Mallard a rarity.

Lastly, in the repeated recall of the twin girls in their funeral dresses in passages about Mallard, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) manifests as an intertext underlining the ongoing racial violence that does not halt before little Black girls. "[T]he twins were reminders of this, tiny girls in funeral dresses" (38) representing the ecologies of death that haunt Mallard, a supposedly safe place. Similar to a black lacey fabric reminding Stella of this fact decades later, floating "little scraps of Sunday dresses" (Morrison 173) hauntingly remind Morrison's protagonist of the 1963 Alabama church bombings, and of the deaths of children in another supposedly safe place in this intertext (cf. Yaeger, *Ghosts* 89). These instances of a southern hauntology, again mediated by fabric scraps, problematize Mallard's strategy of re-narrativization through postcolonial conscription that remains within the logic of colorism and segregation, a strategy Stella takes to extremes, thus corresponding to Ayo A. Coly's criticism of this strategy in *Postcolonial Hauntologies*.

Fluid Reimaginations: Oceanic Practices of Memory, Identity, and Kinship

Fogging up vision, making bodies float, and whirling up identity categories, water features as a forceful element capable of disrupting stable ontologies of race and gender, as well as encouraging remembrance and kinship in *The Vanishing Half*. Understanding the novel's repeated use of watery imagery as meaningful to its reflection on racial hauntings and queer performances brings me to establish a dialogue between the narrative, the hauntological and queer theoretical questions engaged in this essay, and oceanic concepts of memory and relationality like Christina Sharpe's wake, Habiba Ibrahim's Black age, and Fackler's and Schultermandl's oceanic kinship. Oceanic imagery bridges hauntological and queer perspectives within the narrative, but also elucidates tangible, liberating practices in the characters' responses to spectralization, loss, and identity conflicts.

Aligning with an oceanic understanding of historical consciousness and remembrance as situated in and shaped by the ocean, as articulated by Sharpe's concept of wake work, ref-

erences to water introduce a sense of connection to family (history) in Bennett's narrative. As rain, fog, river, or simply tap water, it evokes loving or haunting memories of (missing) kin. For example, listening to a "spring storm" (*VH* 42), Desiree vividly remembers shared experiences with Stella in New Orleans. The passage continues with aquatic references as partner Early emerges out of the rain on Desiree's porch, making her remember their first meeting as teenagers. Likewise, in the novel's final passage, Mallard's river becomes a body that "like all rivers, remember[s] its course" (366), marking it as a place of memory flowing through Louisiana and possibly holding both memories of family and collective memories of Southern US history. Jude and Reese's desire "to forget" (366), arising while floating in the water, is balanced with the narrator's confident, categorical assertion that the water retains a fluid historical consciousness connecting its source and mouth, past and future.

Water therefore has multiple and ambivalent meanings for the characters. Besides sparking the remembrance of kin, water conjures specters of Blackness that haunt Jude, reminding her of the racism experienced in Mallard and making her conceal her skin at Venice Beach (132). Simultaneously, oceanic imaginations of a "mythical island" and freely "floating" (140) triggers memories of colonial history and provokes the imagination of alternative narratives of Black history, freedom, and protection. At the end of the novel, water is imagined as a disruptive element that exposes the arbitrariness of segregation, jumbling the separation between Black and white when an imaginary hurricane unearths and mixes the remains at Mallard's segregated cemetery (365-66). Once again, this passage recalls intertexts, Sarah Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969) and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, which both imagine water making resurface remains of the dispossessed dead through flooding (cf. Yaeger, *Ghosts* 97-98, 101). The scene thereby establishes connections to other Black American women's hauntological narratives that underscore the relevance of the oceanic for visions of justice, because these mixed-up, floating remnants simultaneously uncover historical injustice and signal to a shared humanity.

What Ibrahim and Sharpe call oceanic unmaking (specifically, of age and gender) in the wake forms perhaps one of the strongest bridges between hauntological and queer theoretical approaches to dehumanization and disruptions of identity. Especially the narration of other characters' perception of Jude and Early's unageing through material dispossession illustrate these processes. Traveling from Mallard to L.A., Jude is described as "[a] girl from nowhere and nothing, and if you'd asked any of the other passengers, they would have noticed nothing interesting about her except that she was so, well, black" (*VH* 85). Also echoing Blake's impression of Stella ("the pretty secretary who came from nowhere and had nobody" 201), this judgment reveals the repeated association of uprootedness, lack, and insignificance with Blackness. The passengers' and bus driver's gazes represent this unmaking of subjectivity, which manifests as a simultaneous hypervisibility of Jude's Blackness and an invisibility of her other characteristics. Although Jude travels by choice and for a scholarship by bus over land, the description of how others see her conjures linguistic ghosts of slavery by relating Jude's uprootedness and hypervisible Blackness to the context of a passage. These instances of repeated "stutterance or slippage" (Yaeger *Ghosts* 88), or in

Sharpe's words this "orthography of the wake" (20-21), reveal such repressed continuities of supposedly ended injustice, making legible the hauntology of Blackness in contemporary texts. Despite the narrator labeling Jude as a seventeen-year-old girl, a sense of age, gender, and humanity being unmade dominates when the driver primarily notices her Blackness, perceives her figure as "boyish," and exoticizingly compares her to a "cheetah" (*VH* 85).

Desiree's partner Early exemplifies Ibrahim's concept of Black age, having been a Black boy dispossessed of his childhood due to his parents' poverty. As "a technology of dehumanization" (Ibrahim 14) introduced in the oceanic context of Middle Passage, the category of age works to position Black people outside of normative time, thus depriving them of self-determination and safety by rendering Black children "unchildlike" (2) and Black adults childish (cf. also Reznick 277). Early had lost his family and had to work in "sharecropping" (*VH* 21) from a young age, feeling "like a man since the night his parents left him" (71). Even more than Jude, Early is characterized as "rooted nowhere" (29) and linguistic ghosts appear in the description of his job which disturb linear time by echoing slavers hunting fugitive slaves: "Early stuck to hunting criminals: it was never personal between the criminal and the bondsman, only a simple disagreement over dollars and cents" (54). Although he thinks of himself as indifferent to "the white man's justice" (30) and only concerned with money, him preferring to think of the fugitives as criminals not persons is reminiscent of colonial law that rendered the enslaved property and rejected their personhood. Similarly to Stella, he thus repeats, to a degree, the dehumanization he had experienced himself.

Finally, Fackler's and Schultermandl's notion of queer oceanic kinship speaks to the significance of alternative community-building practices in the aftermath of slavery and segregation, highlighting the caring facet of wake work that *The Vanishing Half* emphasizes as crucial for countering loss. Oceanic kinship is essentially queer and non-anthropocentric as it encompasses forms of "kinship with the ocean and kinship shaped by the ocean [...] beyond the nuclear family" (3). It means nurturing practices that build "commonality and solidarity" (3) in contexts defined by entanglements with the ocean or waterways such as maritime labor and transatlantic slavery. The "shared kinlessness" (4) produced by the slave trade and continued through, for instance, mass incarceration or the disproportionate killing of Black people by police, can mobilize into new kinship formations. The community that Jude creates with Reese, Barry, and their queer friend group in L.A. illustrates that such oceanic kinship practices prompted by kinlessness also offer care for people who, like Reese, deliberately abandon their biological kin because of their transphobic behavior.

The group's kinship and mutual support encourages them to embrace both their queerness and, in Jude's case, her Blackness: "The girls took Jude in until she felt, almost, like one of them. She'd never belonged to a group of friends before" (115). In a passage describing a blackout in L.A., the narrator's gaze sweeping over the city to highlight its inhabitants' diverse acts of kinship and love in the dark, Jude and Reese's relationship is linked to Black oceanic kinship as them walking "home" and "kissing" happens parallel to "the ocean rolling in black" (127). Interestingly, an unnamed "dark-haired woman" resembling Stella lights a candle against the darkness in this same passage. And indeed, she, by

contrast, is unable to build kinship with Loretta and her group of Black friends because Stella cannot share her actual kinlessness and its roots in racial violence with them. Practicing oceanic kinship is thus not divorced from practicing remembrance and a shared historical consciousness – elements that Christina Sharpe's notion of wake work already unites when it speaks of caring for one another, keeping watch with the dead, and creating consciousness as essential for Black aliveness in the wake. Bennett's novel underlines these interconnections of kinship, memory, and identity formation not only on the level of plot, but repeatedly through aquatic imagery. Ultimately, the fluidity of evoked images and narrated practices offer a counterweight to the normative stabilizing tendencies of the segregated, hetero-patriarchal society the characters struggle against.

Conclusion

Imagining the legacy of segregation as a hauntology of Blackness, *The Vanishing Half* narrates its characters' differing responses to hauntings through a contrasting of light and dark, the construction of spatial relations, namely distance or proximity between characters and between them and the past, and through the repeated emphasis on mundane items or scraps that conjure specters and trigger memories. Reading Bennett's novel through a hauntological lens and in dialogue with earlier intertexts highlights how the narrative frames the influence of segregation and gendered racial capitalism on performances of Blackness as an ongoing oppressive structure.

A central theme illustrating the afterlife of segregation is the split, which is mirrored by a nonlinear, fragmented narrative structure and the embodiment of splits in characters' bodies, minds, and families, as they feel spectralized, torn between identities, or separated from kin. Further, hauntings mostly manifest in the form of nightmares, visions, uneasiness and a sense of not belonging. Even hospitable responses to specters cannot fully restore the characters' incomplete knowledge about their family history. This corresponds to Benjamin's idea that pictures of the past only flash up but cannot be reconstructed fully. However, hauntings do prove to be powerful in encouraging changes in most characters' practices of remembrance and kinship as well as in their attitudes toward Blackness, which helps to critically reflect and counter the splitting conditions they experience. These transformative practices are moreover presented as notably queer and oceanic.

Revisiting my question of how feminist and queer thought can inform Black hauntologies, the notions of queer performativities and identity as constant performance that implicates both self and audience help illuminate the centrality of the body and its representations when considering effects of the hauntology of Blackness. The repeated narration of characters avoiding or seeking visibility, read from a queer hauntological perspective, not only demonstrates how hyper- and invisibility constitute modes of spectralization in the wake but also points to potentials of self-determined queer performances that disrupt stable identity categories and extend what are thinkable ways of being. In this vein, Bennett's narrative clearly underscores that liberating performances rely on historical consciousness as offered by specters as well as on collectivity, by evaluating different performative prac-

tices like acting, drag, or passing as more or less beneficial for its characters. While performances motivated by repression and an abjection of Blackness, like Stella's, remain isolating and cannot challenge the injustices of white-supremacist patriarchal capitalism or colonial legacies, the open and collective practice of queer Black kinship and a confrontation with personal and historical trauma are shown to be healing in Sharpe's sense of wake work. As Jude, Reese, and Barry build community, Desiree breaks with transgenerational loss and trauma, and Jude and Kennedy begin to mend the split between their family lines.

As extension of the novel's queer representations, oceanic ways of thinking shape its imaginations of self-reinvention and relationality. Frequently describing moments of remembrance in an aquatic register, the text signals both to the haunting legacy of transatlantic slavery as oceanic context where Black subjectivity was unmade, and to empowering potentials of oceanic approaches to rethinking and practicing memory, kinship, and humanity. Indeed, several of the intertexts discussed in this essay share fantasies about water swirling up and disrupting neatly separated identity categories, thereby making space for Black history and establishing shared humanity, while still acknowledging the ecologies of death in the wake.

Lastly, intertextual echoes of Black American and southern women's writing reflect an ongoing literary engagement with hauntings and the entanglement of race, gender, and class, with Bennett further "intersectionalizing" (Mikić and Maus 291) such explorations by imagining forms of queer community-building. Besides representing a kind of formal haunting, its intertextuality situates the novel within the American literary canon in line with authors like Kate Chopin, Toni Morrison, and Sarah E. Wright, as well as Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer whose influence could not be discussed here. While *The Vanishing Half* and its intertexts draw on elements of the southern Gothic, they remain grounded in the mundane, emphasizing the everyday-ness of gendered racial hauntings that defines their power, as well as the possibilities for resistance and reimaginations that can be enacted every day.

Notes

[1] Derrida's original hauntology as well as following hauntological concepts are fundamentally shaped by (and partly refer explicitly to) Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history (cf. Derrida 227-28; Gordon 65; Powell *Making #BlackLivesMatter* 256; Ibrahim 20, 161). As Benjamin's thinking is influenced both by Jewish theology and Marxist theory, he marries the ideas of redemption and revolution.

[2] Thank you to Oluwadunni Talabi for pointing me into this direction.

[3] Postmemory refers to a form of transgenerational memory that does not rely on one's own experiences but on the transmission of (traumatic) memories from one generation to the next, usually within a family, via "stories, images, and behaviors" (Hirsch 106) that allow for an affective remembrance of experiences that are one generation removed. The notion of a "troubling continuity" (106) of the past in the present is shared with hauntology. Hirsch also recognizes gender, particularly femininity, as constitutive of remembrance in postmemorial contexts shaped by "detachment and forgetting" (124), thus forging another productive link between hauntological and feminist thought.

Notes

[4] The crucial difference between Stella and Reese is, of course, that Stella only pretends to be white but identifies as Black, whereas Reese identifies as male.

[5] The narrative thus manages to show the complexity of drag regarding questions of identity and its performativity: Drag is depicted as not being a "'mere' cross-dressing, as if its practice was mainly to do with something that could be put on and taken off as easily as costume" (Edwards 87).

[6] The split is especially clear in the version designed by Nico and Jo Taylor and published by Dialogue Books, but another cover design of the edition published by Riverhead Books (Penguin) displays a similar motif.

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Biography

Dorit Neumann is a PhD candidate, lecturer, and Research Associate at the Chair of English, Postcolonial, and Media Studies at the University of Münster, Germany, where she is completing a PhD on "Black British Hauntologies: Hauntings of Empire in Black British Literature." Her work places in relation hauntological concepts, Black studies, cultural memory studies, and theories of the oceanic to inquire how their interplay enables new forms of remembrance of transatlantic slavery as well as liberating visions of the future in contemporary Black British writing. Together with Rita Maricocci, Oluwadunni O. Talabi, and Corina Wieser-Cox, she is co-editor of the special issues *Envisioning Queer Racialized Self-Representations in the Americas* (*AmLit*, 2026) and *Queering Postcolonial Worlds* (gender forum, 2025). She is also an advisory board member of the German Association of Anglophone Postcolonial Studies (GAPS).