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Gender, Sexuality, and Simulated Society in *The Vanishing Half*

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* is a complex novel of identity that explores queer themes, primarily through Reese and Barry. Between Reese's transition and Barry and his drag persona, Bianca, one can see aspects of gender performativity, simulation, and the hyperreal. Judith Butler's theories on gender performance and performativity focus on reiterated acts that produce one's gender in the world, and Jean Baudrillard explores the creation of what is considered real. Just as Baudrillard explains how "simulation is... the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal," Butler asserts that "*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*" (Baudrillard, Butler 956). Both of these theories recognize how gender and reality are socially constructed, rather than naturally created. Therefore, by examining *The Vanishing Half*'s Reese and Barry through Butler and Baudrillard's theories, we can begin to understand how Bennett simultaneously deconstructs and validates gender and sexuality in her novel.

Baudrillard states that "the real is produced from miniaturized units," and I propose that this idea of "miniaturized units" can be applied to acts of gender performance, like when Reese "tried on crisp dress shirts, practiced Windsor knots, walked around in slick leather wingtips" (Bennett 151). The "hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself," and gender is a series of "theatrically produced effects that postures as grounds, origins, the normative of the real," meaning that simulations and the hyperreal that are seen throughout the world are constantly being recreated, much like gender, and both create the illusion of the real through imitation (Baudrillard, Butler 956). Essentially, these acts "can be reproduced an indefinite number of times" and are what creates, or reinforces, the normative

genders that exist within the binary, which society generally sees as real in comparison to genders or gender performances that exist outside of the binary.

Though all gender, including normative gender, is performative, queer performativity can disrupt or deconstruct the binary, like how drag “implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (Butler 956). Barry’s drag performances as Bianca are theatrical and purposefully extravagant in their imitation of women and femininity, which is typical for drag as a whole. This exemplifies Butler’s assertion that “the parodic or imitative effect of gay identities works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization” (957). The non-normative experiences of queer identities and performances, and specifically drag, uncover the social construct of gender and sexuality, pointing out that there is no real or natural form of these identities.

Though Jude describes Barry’s drag performances as being “fun because everyone knew that it was not real,” I believe, from Baudrillard’s perspective, “illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible” (Bennett 124, Baudrillard). As previously stated, there is no real; there are simply established creations, social constructs. Parodies and simulations, like drag, expose this. Therefore, Barry’s drag shows are not just a source of entertainment or an alternate form of gender performance but are also a form of resistance against socially constructed views on gender and the subjugation of homosexuality.

When people learn that what they have always believed is not the truth, but rather something created that is able to be challenged or changed, it often results in negative reactions from society as a whole. This fear and lack of understanding is part of the reason why many lash out or discriminate against queer people. They see such gender performativity as “infinitely more

dangerous since it always suggests... that law and order themselves,” or in this case, the gender binary, “might really be nothing more than a simulation” (Baudrillard). In explaining simulations and the hyperreal, Baudrillard describes it as “an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter.” He is speaking of more concrete things, like Disneyland, but queer performativity exposes that the nothing inside or outside of the gender binary is as natural or simple as society had thought. While it can be overwhelming to wrap one’s mind around this, the discriminatory and sometimes violent responses prove that “none of our societies know how to manage their mourning for the real, for power, for the social itself” (Baudrillard). I agree with this, as humans dislike change, so the desire for a concrete, natural truth in the form of binary gender, sex, and sexuality, as well as the simplicity of the power and control the real has on society, is often upsetting for those used to this system, whether they truly like it or not.

Bennett recognizes the danger queer people face, describing an incident where Reese is given a black eye when he is discovered to be transgender. Reese concludes that “to be honest about the past meant that he would be considered a liar. The only safety was in hiding” (Bennett 154). He essentially comes to understand that “it is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence,” because “as far as the established order is concerned, they are always of the order of the real” (Butler 957-958, Baudrillard). The simple, straightforward expectations many have for sexuality, gender, and/or biological sex force many into hiding and conforming for safety because society is adamant that the established binaries are the only true and real ways of expressing gender and sexuality.

In Reese's case, after this incident, rather than performing femininity, he was more aware and careful about the ways he performed his masculine gender, in hopes that it would translate to being seen as male. The way Reese's performance of a masculine gender becomes visible and "real," to the world and to himself, is through his physicality. Once again connecting gender and drag, Butler states, "if gender is drag... then gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait" (Butler 960). We especially see this production through Reese when we first learn about his past. He cuts his hair and begins binding his chest with a bandage, and ultimately, he "learned to walk again, legs wide, shoulders square" (Bennett 115). He succeeds in his performativity, as "no one could tell that he'd ever been her, and sometimes, he could hardly believe it either," with Jude even admitting that she tried "to picture Therese. But she couldn't. She only saw Reese." (Bennett 116, 117). Still, the safety he is afforded by his performativity is tenuous because, as Butler says, a disruption of the repetition of performance can result in a change in performativity, or the way the world views Reese.

Safety is not Reese's only concern, however, as he wishes to express what feels right for him. Despite Butler arguing that there is no internal sense of gender, she does state that she does not believe "drag is a "role" that can be taken on or taken off at will," and that "there is no volitional subject behind the mime who decides, as it were, which gender it will be today" (957). She is essentially saying people may still be drawn to drag, and I believe this can be applied to gender presentation as a whole, meaning the desire to do drag or achieve a certain kind of gender performativity is still something to acknowledge and respect. Bennett also recognizes this in her novel, explaining that "the truth was that he'd always been Reese" and how Barry "pushed her [Bianca] out of sight, even though he thought about her, shopped for her, planned for her

eventual return” (115, 144). Despite the socially constructed nature of gender and sexuality, it is still important to recognize the impact and importance of those identities, especially for queer people.

I believe viewing Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half* through a theoretical lens allows us to better understand the characters, story, and theories. The novel further exposes the socially constructed world we live in but eases in those who were unaware of such truths. It also reminds readers that these constructions are still part of our lives and have material consequences for those who push against them. Bennett’s sympathetic, nuanced, and realistic portrayal of queer experiences and identity hopefully helps others better understand, respect, and protect those that live outside of normativity, or what is real, and teaches us all to continue to stay open, curious, and compassionate about the people and world that surrounds us.

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