Spatial Anxiety and Identity in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

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> If "home" is somehow understood to be a topophilic space, then what of the unhomely spaces in which an alienated subject experiences the cartographic anxiety or sense of bewilderment that so typifies many literary representations of space?
> —Robert T. Tally, Jr. (*Topophrenia* 21)

> What is missing in city fiction and present in village fiction is the ancestor. . . . The country is beautiful—healing because more often than not, such an ancestor is there.
> —Toni Morrison ("City" 39)

Homelessness, as disproportionately experienced by Black Americans, is not only the absence of a roofed and walled space but also a visceral feeling of spatial anxiety, unheimlich, and "not-being-at-home."[1] Even if homelessness is fundamentally a housing problem (Colburn and Aldern 10), this alone does not resolve the psychological sense of homelessness experienced by many minority groups in the United States. Toni Morrison and Brit Bennett interrogate this through Bride in *God Help the Child* (2015) and Jude in *The Vanishing Half* (2020), respectively. Both novels depict the acute sense of homelessness felt by these female protagonists in their homes, a topophilic space, a space of love,

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ostensibly meant to provide belonging, security, and freedom from fear, revealing how their spatial anxieties transcend physical boundaries and affect their interactions with the outside world. Despite portraying this sense of homelessness, both novels chronicle Black women's physical and metaphorical journeys to detach themselves from a gendered and racialized geography to achieve a sense of belonging, thus refuting the stereotypical image of Black Americans as inherently disconnected from their communities.

Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, one of the most celebrated books of 2020, earned her critical comparisons with Morrison and James Baldwin. Bennett herself acknowledges Morrison's profound influence, describing her as "an intrinsic part of who she is as a writer" and likening her to a figure "that you feel has mothered you in some way" (Verona). When *The Vanishing Half* is read in parallel with *God Help the Child*, striking similarities emerge: the complex bond between a light-skinned mother and her dark-skinned daughter, Bennett's extension of Morrison's narrative about Black and white twins, the depiction of Black women's embodied spatial experience and anxieties, and the portrayal of Black women's struggle to transcend gendered and racialized geography. Notably, both Bride and Jude are born with deep blue-black skin, inducing feelings of psychological and existential homelessness and displacement and depriving them of place attachment and a stable sense of self. In *God Help the Child*, Bride grapples with a profound feeling of not belonging and lacking emotional connection in her mother Sweetness's home. Similarly, in *The Vanishing Half*, Jude experiences displacement and homelessness in her mother Desiree's hometown, Mallard, as she navigates colorism, identity, and the longing for acceptance. Thus, homelessness at home becomes a predicament for both characters in what they perceive as a topophilic space.

Such a predicament thus raises the question: if the supposedly topophilic home turns out to be an unhomely space, what about the unhomely spaces that alienate Black subjects and generate a sense of spatial anxiety or bewilderment? Undeniably, the long history of racist social practices to subjugate and disenfranchise Black communities can be said to have produced geographies steeped in "human disempowerment and dispossession" (McKittrick 3). These geographies, as noted by Sharlene Mollett and Caroline Faria, lead to the displacement of African American women from certain places yet naturalize them in others (567). Melissa C. Brown posits that this inadvertently results in an America where Black people must constantly navigate spaces of denial and resistance. The white patriarchal domination of space, referred to by Gillian Rose as "transparent *space*" (62) and by Katherine McKittrick as "geographies of domination" (x), creates territories of oppression. Within these territories, Black women have endured both literal and discursive confinements, thus reinforcing their marginalization. Moreover, by infusing a sense of inferiority and hatred through othering, objectifying, commodifying, excluding, and dislocating Black bodies,

the power and ideologies inherent in producing and maintaining transparent space tend to undermine Black subjects' identities. Additionally, Black communities replicate and mimic white patriarchal spatial ideologies in producing their own inhabited spaces, further marginalizing Black women and confining them to subordinate, peripheral spaces and making the negotiation of gendered and racialized spaces a dominant aspect of their spatial encounters. This exploration is crucial in understanding the pervasive impact of spatial injustice on Black women's lives and their relentless struggle for a sense of belonging in a landscape that has been ostensibly designed to exclude them. To unravel the complexity of spatial forms and the multifaceted nature of Black women's spatial experiences, a critical theory and practice of spatiality in relation to literature is needed (Tally, *Spatiality* 144). Indeed, a broader spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences, which can be observed in connection with the burgeoning field of geocriticism, is particularly relevant here. Drawing on Marxist and existential-phenomenological schools of thought, Robert T. Tally, Jr. adopts an eclectic approach to human spatiality, asserting that objective spatial structures and systems "condition, not to say determine," our existential *topophrenia*. Tally conceptualizes the subjective experience of space to describe anxieties concerning space and place. He defines *topophrenia* as "the subjective engagement with a given place, with one's sense of place, and with the possible projection of alternative spaces" (*Topophrenia* 23). This concept encompasses Yi-Fu Tuan's *topophilia* (love of place), Dylan Trigg's *topophobia* (fear of place), and a more generalized sense of place-mindedness characterized by uneasiness, anxiety, discontentment, and estrangement (Tally, *Topophrenia* 23). Both familiar and unfamiliar, homely and unhomely spaces can engender spatial anxiety. This spatial anxiety makes human subjects feel unheimlich, equating to "not-being-at-home" (21-22). Existentially, "a fundamental place-mindedness is part of who we are as people, as subjects, as beings" (Tally, "Doing" 11), and our subjective engagement with a place "informs our activities and thinking" (Tally, *Topophrenia* 23).

Black women's sense of embodiment as racial and sexual bodies (the consciousness of one's bodily experience and the feeling of conspicuousness) often leads to heightened spatial anxiety, characterizing their subjective engagement with specific geographical spaces.[2] This includes feeling displaced/out of place, unheimlich, being conscious of being gazed at, feeling confined physically and metaphorically, and having specific fears or phobias (Simonsen and Koefoed 524, 531; McKittrick xv). These anxieties result from homely and unhomely spaces, forming an essential aspect of one's daily encounters with power-laden spatialities and daily experiences of otherness (Simonsen and Koefoed 531). This spatial anxiety typifies Morrison's and Bennett's literary representations of space for Bride and Jude.

The interplay between objective space, subjective experiences of space, spatial anxieties, and identity in both novels has not been fully explored, and

no comparative analysis has been conducted on *God Help the Child* and *The Vanishing Half*.[3] Given the parallel life trajectories of Bride and Jude and the thematic links between the two novels, this essay uses the framework of objective spatial hierarchy (gendered/racialized space) and subjective experience of space (topophrenia) to analyze how spatiality informs Bride's and Jude's identities. By combining these geocritical concepts, we move beyond the usual Marxist focus on the objective spatial hierarchy to a more balanced approach that integrates objective structures and subjective experiences of space. We highlight Black women's embodied experiences of space and their spatial anxieties in homely and unhomely spaces. Analyzing the dramatic intertextualities between Bride and Jude, we reveal the mechanism of spatiality in constituting Black women's identities through gendered and racialized spatial structures and female protagonists' topophrenia.

Homelessness at Home: Racialized Space versus Site of Resistance

Discussing the centrality of home to humanist geography, Tim Cresswell summarizes Gaston Bachelard's definition of house/home as "a primal space that acts as a first world or first universe that then frames our understandings of all the spaces outside" (24). Such a perspective emphasizes the home's foundational role in shaping our perceptions and interactions with the outside world. In explaining the concept of home, bell hooks conversely infuses it with a political dimension, describing it as "a site of resistance and liberation struggle" (43) and a "[space] of care and nurturance in the face . . . of racist oppression, of sexist domination" (42). Consequently, home and community are the most critical personal and intimate spaces within which Black women are able to recognize and establish themselves. However, the community in which Bride grows up and the community of Mallard for Jude fail to be refuges and bases for activism to challenge oppressive forces. Instead, the two homes degenerate into racialized spaces, revealing how racist ideology embeds itself in physical spaces. At home, Bride and Jude experience a profound sense of homelessness. Space acts as "a tool of thought and of action . . . a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (Lefebvre 26), revealing its agential power and its intended effect of constricting subjects of color into identities and geographies legible to power (Saylor 114). Bride and Jude experience othering, alienation, and psychological homelessness, and this spatial anxiety transforms into an inferiority complex about their bodies and identities. Through this rendering of home/community, Morrison and Bennett move more significant social conflicts into the private sphere, where they restage racism while conceiving possible resistance to oppression. The two novels reveal the differentiated potentials of home: it can be reduced to a miniature space for racial manipulation, and hence an unhomely space; or it can be an empowering site through imaginative appropriation,

and hence a homely space. A comparative study of the two novels demonstrates how motherhood reshapes the gendered and racialized spatial structure, transforming it into a site of empowerment and resistance, thereby liberating Black children from dominant geographies.

In *God Help the Child*, Bride's home is a microcosm of racial manipulation. This space internalizes the larger spatial order and ideology, where her mother, Sweetness, acts as an accomplice to racism and co-disciplines Bride into accepting her ugliness as a blue-black-skinned girl, engendering in her a sense of existential homelessness and creating a rupture in her identity. Lula Ann Bridewell (Bride) is born in the 1990s to a light-skinned couple. Her blue-black skin leads to her parents' marriage breakdown due to mistrust and mutual recrimination. Sweetness, as a newly abandoned wife with a Black infant as a burden, can only secure herself a place from a white landlord, Mr. Leigh, with "upped" rent. Bride recalls it as an "awful apartment" (Morrison, *God* 177) that embodies Black women's lived space, with racism embedded in the physical space, transforming it into a social space saturated with racist practices. The fact that "Sweetness's bedroom always seemed unlit" (53), a recurring image in Bride's memory, symbolizes the broader theme of "*dark rooms*" (148). The house is dark, unlit, and with windows always closed, not because of poor amenities but because it is the only spatial strategy Sweetness can employ to keep the apartment—to turn a blind eye to Leigh's sexual harassment of children happening below. The one time Bride opens the window, she discovers Leigh's crime and is reprimanded by her furious mother. Sweetness's fury arises from being "interested in keeping our apartment" (54). Bride's home thus shows how visible and invisible housing discrimination relegates Black people to confined and restricted spaces, turning their lived space into a dark and tight space or an unhomely space that is "dominated—and hence passively experienced" (Lefebvre 39).

Sweetness disciplines Bride to teach her "to keep her head down and not to make trouble" (Morrison, *God* 7), which she believes will help her daughter navigate geographical spaces and avoid potential humiliations and abuses. However, Sweetness's discipline reveals her internalization of racist ideology, evokes fears, makes home unhomely, and reduces Bride's subjectivity to submission. As Bride says, "When fear rules, obedience is the only survival choice," so "I behaved and behaved and behaved" (31-32). She "behaved" and testified against an innocent teacher accused of rape, which weighs on her conscience. The atmosphere in Sweetness's house engenders topophobia in Bride's inner heart, her home becoming a place of fear—"shallow, cold, deliberately hostile[,] . . . where she never knew the right thing to do or say or remember what the rules were" (78). In the house, "she was the ugly, too-black little girl" (144). The gold hoops Sweetness buys for Bride after she falsely testifies against the teacher denote the internalization of her surroundings and colonization of her inner heart, both by her mother and racialized space. This spatial anxiety, or topophobia, at home

induces a sense of homelessness and estrangement within Bride, igniting her desire to escape. After leaving home, Lula Ann Bridewell becomes Bride by cutting off the first and last parts of her name, symbolizing her dislocation from her past and the future.

Bride's spatial experience in Sweetness's home is marked by uncanniness, a topophobic feeling of being at home but not at home, revealing how "the politics of home and belonging are gendered, racialised" (Blunt and Dowling 233) and how "[h]ome is not separated from public, political, worlds but is constituted *through* them" (30). Bride's heightened spatial anxiety at home also extends to public spaces, such as her school, where, she says, "I didn't complain to the teacher for the same reason Sweetness cautioned me about Mr. Leigh—I might get suspended or even expelled. So I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no antibiotic available" (Morrison, *God* 56-57). This further accentuates the subjection and docility of Bride's body in racialized space.

Unlike Sweetness, who loathes Bride's deep blue-black skin, Desiree in *The Vanishing Half* adores her daughter Jude: "Desiree stared into her baby's face, enchanted" (Bennett, *Vanishing* 29). Desiree tries to make her home an empowering site for Jude despite her husband's violent tendencies and the hostilities of the townsfolk. Jude is born in Washington, DC, to the dark-skinned Sam and the light-skinned Desiree. At home, Desiree's light skin makes her a scapegoat for Sam's anger and frustration at whites, causing their home to be a space where she suffers gendered and racial violence. However, Jude can identify with her father through Blackness as "she liked being part of an us" (99). When Jude is taken back to Mallard, a color-struck town in Louisiana, her dark complexion is foregrounded as her only identity: "So black that you could see nothing but her. A fly in milk, contaminating everything." Physically, "[s]he would get no darker," but mentally, "she seemed to [be darker] the longer she lived in Mallard." The light-skinned Mallard makes Jude feel darker, like 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" (95).

The idea for the town of Mallard first came to its founder Alphonse Decuir in 1848 and materialized on the sugarcane field he inherited from his slave-owning father. As such, the very existence of Mallard implies and is associated with a type of violence committed against Black women by slave masters, a materialized site where white masters perpetrated sexual violence against enslaved women. Bennett constructs this constricted little community as "[a] third place" whose inhabitants see themselves as a third group—"never [to] be accepted as white but refus[ing] to be treated like Negroes" (6). As such, Mallard never truly escapes the Black/white and oppressed/oppressor binary, and neither do its residents. Instead, as Ohad Reznick argues, "the town reinforces racialized perceptions of skin tone" (275) even as it challenges the Black/white binary. In practice,

Mallard's place identity as a third space for light-skinned Black people and its borders are sustained and stabilized through social practices such as endogamous marriage, Founding Day celebrations, and the expulsion of dark-skinned Black people. As a place, Mallard internalizes "an anti-Black mind-set." At the same time, it has never been really acknowledged by authorities as an existing place and has never been mapped. Although the townspeople "act White," they still fail "to perform Whiteness in front of White people" (Reznick 276). Mallard never really becomes what Edward Soja calls *thirdspace*— an encompassing, fluid, and heterogeneous space of differences—or what Rose calls a paradoxical space—an inclusive space encompassing "the possibility of a space which does not replicate the exclusions of the Same and the Other" (137).[4]

For Jude, Mallard "takes on characteristics of an antagonist," where she finds herself "attacked not by other human beings but by pervasive, indefinable, and malignant spatial conditions" (Kort 17). Jude feels displaced, out of place, and "dazed, as if she'd woken up in a foreign country" (Bennett, *Vanishing* 40). Far away from Washington, DC, she loses her only connection to a stable identity. Jude's comparison of her mother's body to a "strange topography" (97) exposes her lack of identification with her mother's gender and racial identities. Her inability to perform whiteness leads to her marginalization by Mallard society. Moreover, this embodied experience deeply informs her perception of Mallard; as Rose observes, "Women's sense of embodiment can make space feel like a thousand piercing eyes." In Jude's case, it is "a space which constitutes women as embodied objects to be looked at" (146). Jude's lack of identification with Mallard manifests in her topophobia and her lack of acceptance of her Black body and identity. Mallard becomes a place of fear, from which she always wants to escape. However, she cannot easily escape its imprint; when she does leave, "the town wouldn't leave her" (Bennett, *Vanishing* 141). The town lingers as "a type of violence" that instills self-hatred in Jude and ruptures her self-identity, haunting her like a childhood demon even when she is no longer there (McCann). At Venice Beach, California, far removed geographically and culturally from Mallard, Jude still imagines the same societal judgment. Her lingering spatial anxiety and fear of judgment demonstrate how Mallard's detrimental psychological impact extends beyond its physical boundaries, continuing to shape her identity and interactions with the outside world.

Despite the malice of Mallard toward Jude, Desiree never becomes an accomplice of racism like Sweetness in *God Help the Child*. Instead, she protects Jude, confronts whoever tries to abuse her, and teaches her to ignore the name-calling and staring. The House of Decuir, the founder's house "imbued with so much history" (Bennett, *Vanishing* 25), is a symbol of Mallard's toxic colorism. The house and the town maintain their place identity by keeping dark-skinned people out, as shown in the humiliating experience of Early Jones being run off by Desiree's mother. Desiree defies the town's expectation that "you ought

to at least look like you were trying to hide it" (73) by "dragging his blueblack child all over town" (5). Her bringing Jude and then Early into Mallard and the House of Decuir upsets the racialized geographies by physically and metaphorically disrupting its spatial order, color line, and borders—thus turning the once racialized home into an inclusive and heterogeneous environment, a meaningful location to find belonging, feel protected, and be themselves. Early's comment that "Mallard bent. A place was not solid. . . . A town was jelly, forever molding around your memories" (56), and the fact that "Mallard was no longer Mallard" (344), reveal the disruption of Mallard's boundaries by Jude and Early. This "elimination" of Mallard shows Bennett's stance against colorism and internalized racism. If Jude feels displaced or out of place due to the sudden relocation and her dark skin, Decuir's house offers her a physical space to anchor herself, thereby providing some stability in her identity. Desiree's motherly love and rebellion against the town prevent Jude from falling into the "despairing ostracism" (López Ramírez 178) to which marginal subjects are condemned—the same ostracism that drives Bride to falsely accuse her teacher of a crime in *God Help the Child*. Through the mother-daughter bond of Desiree and Jude, Mónica García Morgado argues, Bennett "puts Mallard's assimilationist legacy and generational trauma to an end . . . ultimately freeing Jude from [Morrison's] Pecola and Lula Ann's chains" (84). Under the joint force of the two contradictory spaces of home and community, Jude gradually develops an inner resistance against othering gazes directed toward her Black body.

Los Angeles: Urban Space and Mobility

The striking similarities between *God Help the Child* and *The Vanishing Half* also lie in the setting of Los Angeles as the primary site where the life trajectories of adult Bride and Jude unfold. *The Vanishing Half* imagines Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s as a multicultural center of immigration, aligning with Soja's thirdspace. The Los Angeles portrayed by Morrison, meanwhile, is racially diversified but a model of "degrading capitalist American society" (Bougherira 263). Both Bennett and Morrison praise the liberation the city and its mobility offer Black women but also highlight the limitations of this liberation through the objectification and denial of Black women's bodies. The two novels outline the transformation of Los Angeles from an immigrant city to a consumerist utopia and portray how women of different generations realize themselves in this space.

The description of Los Angeles in *God Help the Child* is relatively limited and is presented mainly through Bride's workplace, Sylvia, Inc., and her condo. Sylvia, Inc. is a cosmetics company that represents the larger commercialized world, making it easy for Morrison to render Bride's new identity as superficial and reveal how capitalism is "a conspiracy that entrapped people in a widening

gyre of an everlasting sense of alienation and materialism" (Bougherira 264). The emphasis on appearance in the company's culture is apparent in the depiction of Sylvia, Inc. as "a company practically run by bi's, straights, trannies, gays and anybody who took their looks seriously" (Morrison, *God* 48). This portrayal highlights how appearance is prioritized to meet societal perceptions of beauty. This emphasis profoundly shapes Bride's sense of self, making her incapable of seeing herself through the lens of Blackness and only through the eyes of others. The visibility Bride pursues comes at the price of commodifying Blackness rather than being empowered by it. In *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde discusses the two sides of visibility for Black women: "Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism," and "visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength" (42). The idea that "visibility is the cornerstone of Black female identity," as articulated by Lorde and summarized by Deborah Clarke (600), is challenged here. Bride's visibility as "[a] panther in snow" (Morrison, *God* 34), dressing "'[o]nly white and all white all the time'" (33) to highlight her Blackness, is only a way to cater to the commercialization of the Black body in a commercialized world where "Black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilized world" (36). The white pearl dot earrings she wears denote her commodified self, representing the designer Jeri's suggestion for her to wear only white to emphasize her Blackness. This choice reflects her attempt to "capitalize on her dark skin" (143) and cater to the notion that "Black sells." Therefore, her high visibility in Sylvia, Inc. and Los Angeles reveals her otherness as an exotic and racialized body to be consumed.

The company and the city "made me, remade me," Bride says, making her "move differently—not a strut, not that pelvis-out rush of the runway—but a stride, slow and focused" (36). This change, shifting from keeping her head down to the measured stride, seems to signify that Bride finally sheds her traumatic past, unbinds herself from Sweetness's racialized home, and gains control over her life. However, she can never escape the racialized and gendered identities assigned to her in the city. She subjects herself to the racialized and gendered space and allows her body to be consumed, not only as a spectacular, exotic, and othered racial body but also as a gendered body, as indicated in her relationship with men: "Men leaped and I let myself be caught" (36). As Delphine Gras argues, the seeming liberation the city brings might be "the more glamorous yet connected facet of the objectification of her body" (7). Bride appropriates the broader world in creating her personal space, as revealed in her homemaking practice. She decorates her luxurious apartment with fashion magazines and the most expensive furniture. Daniel Miller explains that "'It is the material culture within our home that appears both as our appropriation of the larger world and often as the representation of that world within our private domain'" (1).

The material culture Bride creates through her homemaking practices serves as an appropriation of the larger world, its materialism and commodification, and a reflection and symbol of the outside world within private living spaces. The personal space and the external space jointly constitute her identity as subjected to consumerism in relation to racism and sexism. In short, Morrison shows the liberating yet confining qualities of the city through Bride's confident yet superficial and lifeless sense of self, which triggers her desire to escape after her breakup with Booker.

In *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett depicts Los Angeles as a heterogeneous space of immigrants. As Barry says, "'Seems like everybody in this city's from somewhere else'" (155). In 1978, Jude left Mallard, but Mallard lingers, and she still experiences heightened spatial anxiety in public spaces. However, as a multicultural center with no clear exclusivity rules, Los Angeles allows Jude to resist Mallard's imprints. Reese, Jude's boyfriend, tells her of California's origin story from the Black Queen Calafia, and their recognition of Los Angeles's multicultural, heterogeneous quality liberates them slightly from self-hatred. Even though Jude and Reese never really escape the South, they are still "'new people here'" (149). The urban space's liberating effect lies in its being a "world of strangers." As Kirsten Simonsen and Lasse Koefoed observe, urban space is "'a world of strangers' [that] open[s] up special possibilities of existence" (522),where "living with difference is practiced and tested on a daily and permanent basis by a multiplicity of individual and collective subjects whose identities are, in turn, shaped by space and place" (Vaiou 581). Los Angeles is a "world of strangers," a sphere of possibility for the existence of multiplicity, which challenges the constraints of the homogeneous environment in Mallard. This multicultural space opens possibilities of existence for its inhabitants. Simonsen recommends considering place as encounters and specific articulations of different social practices, relations, narratives, meanings and materialities (16). Mirage, a community of trans people and drag queens, has a heterogeneous sexual and gender identity similar to that of Sylvia, Inc. in *God Help the Child*. However, Bennett highlights its heterogeneous quality as a "locus of encounters" and a space for people to perform their gender and sexual identity. Jude's urban encounters with the trans man Reese and the drag queen Barry in Mirage enable her to recognize the performativity and fluidity of identity. Her countless urban encounters gradually shape her state of mind, transforming her into one of the "new people" who "belonged to a group of friends" (Bennett, *Vanishing* 124), revealing her growing sense of belonging within the city's heterogenous social landscape.

The city facilitates geographical mobility, which its inhabitants can readily translate into social mobility. Morrison expresses the significance of mobility through Scully's voice in *A Mercy* (2008). When imagining his future as a free man, Scully first thinks of buying a horse because "[a]nyone limited to walking everywhere never seemed to get anywhere" (181). Scully's dream of greater

mobility and freedom forms a sharp contrast with those of women and reveals a differentiated mobility. Doreen Massey draws on many surveys to show "how women's mobility, for instance, is restricted—in a thousand different ways, from physical violence to being ogled at or made to feel quite 'out of place'—not by 'capital,' but by men" (148). Restrictions on women's mobility are crucial channels of subordination to confine them to specific locations and identities (179). Massey summarizes Kirsten Birkett's reasons for women's restricted mobility as "a complex mix of colonialism, ex-colonialism, racism, changing gender relations and relative wealth" (148). The intersection of colonialism, racism, sexism, and classism constitute the "power geometry" (149) that designs the norms of mobility and generates spatial anxieties in women, such as fear of being raped and other forms of physical violence, the male and colonial gaze, and the feeling of being out of place that results from internalizing this geography of fear.

In Morrisson's and Bennett's novels, the gendering of space involves differentiated mobility; Black women are even more restricted, as revealed by their fear of public spaces. Jude's grandmother Adele warns her daughters that the "'[o]nly thing waitin for you out there is wildness'" (Bennett, *Vanishing* 9). Mothers pass on to their daughters this gendered sense of space, which reinforces their racial and gender roles as domestic workers for whites. In Mallard, Black women such as Adele are destined to be cleaners for white families, and her house is always surrounded by the sheets and quilts of white strangers. This gendered sense of space and the racial-sexual division of labor affect the construction of gender identity, resulting in limitations of physical mobility for Black women, as described at the beginning of the novel: "In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either" (5).

In *God Help the Child*, Bride's journey to track her boyfriend has received much attention from critics, with some likening it to a spiritual journey. Often overlooked, however, is that the journey also highlights Bride's spatial anxieties as a Black woman. The overwhelming signals and signs on the roads and highways disorient Bride. Specifically, the amber, silver, and gold alerts broadcasting missing people and child abduction exaggerate the sense of danger. Bride's spatial anxiety on the road is closely associated with her fear of "unknown territory" (78), her gendered sense of the road, particularly her fear of being raped or abused as a woman. Her spatial anxiety makes her hallucinate more fears, turning the moon into a "toothless grin," a tree limb into "a throttling arm," and the sky into "gleaming knives." This sense of the uncanny on the road makes her feel "world-hurt—an awareness of malign forces changing her from a courageous adventurer into a fugitive" (83). The menacing, unheimlich, and sinister landscape Bride hallucinates on the road can be read as her schizophrenic experiences of space. As Joyce Davidson notes:

> In such cases of psychosis, the subject appears to have lost their sense of connection with objective space, and feels (with)drawn into their own fragmented and

> frightening spatiality. The ability to synthesise a tolerable compound of lived and objective space has been lost. We might say s/he has lost the ability to maintain the necessary balance . . . between lived and objective space that allows for a comfortable, unthinking rapport with the world. (647)

Bride experiences a spatial distortion very similar to Davidson's analysis of the deviant spatialities associated with schizophrenia. The world and nature become unheimlich and sinister so that she feels drawn into frightening spatiality and loses the ability to maintain a necessary and balanced interaction with the lived space. This also reflects that Bride is unsure and anxious about what the journey will entail and reveals her deeply rooted sense of not belonging anywhere. This loss of communication with the world and schizophrenic anxiety climaxes when she crashes her car into "the world's first and biggest tree, which was circled by bushes hiding its lower trunk" (Morrison, *God* 82), where she seems to be forced to embrace and confront nature directly. Although Bride's luxury Jaguar significantly increases her mobility, enabling her to return to rural space, freeing herself from the imprints of the commercialized city and her mother's racialized house, her car crash seems to indicate Morrison's suspicion of the degrading capitalist city and doubt about the liberating effect of mobility for Black women.

In the face of racialized geography and its lingering impact, Bennett posits mobility as part of the liberation for Jude. Los Angeles provides Jude greater mobility, especially through her work with the Catering Van, which allows her to roam the city, enjoy its spectacles, and know different walks of life:

> "And I get to see the city. More fun than being stuck in some old library all day."
>
> She worked jobs from Ventura to Huntington Beach, Pasadena to Bel Air. . . . From here, Mallard felt farther away than ever. Maybe, in time, she would forget it. Push it away, bury it deep inside herself, until she only thought of it as a place she'd heard about, not a place where she'd once lived. (Bennett, *Vanishing* 148)

The juxtaposition of the extensive geographical range of Jude's catering service and the listing of all the kinds of people she meets paints a vivid picture of the diverse communities and different facets of the city, contrasting sharply with the confinement she felt in Mallard. This mobility allows her to see the city and become a sort of *flâneur*. Summarizing Michel de Certeau's concept of walking as a form of resistance, Tally states that "the street-level pedestrian, the window-shopper, or the *flâneur*, can both escape from the totalizing gaze of the eye of power, and can actively disrupt and reorganize the spatial relations of power" (*Spatiality* 128). The line "from here, Mallard felt farther away than ever" indicates how mobility helps Jude escape the totalizing gaze of racism and exorcise the spell that Mallard had cast on her, both physically and psychologically. This physical and psychological distance allows Jude to "forget" Mallard,

to "push it away, bury it deep inside herself" until it becomes as distant as a place she had only heard of. Mobility can facilitate personal growth and redefine identity, and Jude's journey through Los Angeles is a metaphor for her broader journey toward self-acceptance and autonomy.

Body Space and the Rural

In *God Help the Child*, as Alice Sundman suggests, "movement and a sense of homecoming form fundamental parts of processes of healing" (2). As Bride moves from the city to a more rural setting, especially in Steve and Evelyn's and Queen's houses, a sense of homecoming emerges as she establishes a closer relationship with the land and spatial imaginaries of home. The novel highlights the role of the body as a site of identity in depictions of Sweetness's rejection of Bride's blue-black body, the exploitation of the Black female body by consumerism, the transformations of Bride's body after trauma, the recovery of her body, and the transformation into a maternal body. Aligning with this is the transformation of Bride's spatial anxiety from topophobia to dislocation, a closer relationship with the land, a sense of rootedness, and spatial imaginaries of home.

Bride finds her true self and shatters her commodification in Whiskey, a "hick town up north" (Morrison, *God* 74), which she also calls a "place so primitive" (98) and the "wilderness" (159). The town's location in the open countryside denotes characteristics beyond the confines of the commodified city. Steve and Evelyn's reliance on nature rather than modern technologies in their homemaking suggests that their house is a space that interacts deeply with nature. The philosophy of simplicity and modesty in the house has a purifying influence on Bride by "challenge[ing] the materialism and the sophistication of the city life" (Silini and Majdoubeh 88). This anti-capitalist mode of living decapitalizes and decommodifies Bride, enabling her to see through the superficiality of material culture and objectification and distance herself from the capitalist framework. As Hana Bougherira contends, "while Bride falls in the trap of shallowness in the city, she develops a deeper philosophy on life in the Evelyn's house" (271).

Queen's house further decommodifies Bride, returning her to the "ugly, too-black little girl in her mother's house" (Morrison, *God* 144), but does so differently by "allow[ing] her to escape commodity feminism" (Gras 16) and exorcising the superficial and exotic sense of self. Roumaïssa Silini and Ahmad Majdoubeh note that "the racist production of space contributes to the commodification of the black body" (79). In the city, Bride's body is commodified as "an edible or animalized commodity" (Gras 8) and "an exotic commodity" (10), as shown in phrases describing her such as "Hershey's syrup" and "whipped cream and chocolate soufflé" (Morrison, *God* 33). Queen's first comment to Bride, "You look like something a raccoon found and refused to eat" (144), dispels the idea that she is an edible commodity and "leads to a first step in self-empowerment,"

makes her "learn to value herself outside of the discourse of commodity feminism," and frees her "from the prison of artifices" (Gras 14). By linking Queen's house with her mother's, Bride identifies Queen as an othermother figure, "who assist[s] bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (Collins 178). Nevertheless, in contrast to Sweetness's racialized motherhood that dwarfs Bride, Queen proves to be a real mother, helping Bride shake off her commodified self by "delet[ing] an entire vocabulary of compliments" (Morrison, *God* 144). Thus, Queen's house serves as "the purgation of mother Sweetness model" (Bougherira 271), exorcising commodity feminism.

Bride's initial perception of Queen's home as "a witch's den" (Morrison, *God* 145) suggests its magical impact, mainly from Queen's rich and varied homemaking practices, including her culinary arts and traditional African quilt-making and crafts. As Blunt and Dowling state, "What home means and how it is materially manifest are created and re-created through everyday homemaking practices, which are themselves tied to spatial imaginaries of home" (309-10). Queen's homemaking practices have "created and re-created" the meaning of her house, resisting and recasting the dominant ideologies of the Black home. She creates a personalized and anti-commodified cultural space by combining diverse cultural elements. Her handcrafted items celebrate her African American cultural heritage and reject consumerism and materialism. She uses her creative talent to embrace differences to create a home, a form of resistance against dominant cultural norms and economic structures that seek to commodify and homogenize everyday life and space. The material culture she creates is expressive of her Black feminist homemaking practices and her cultural identity. As Iris Marion Young explains, "We dwell by making the places and things that structure and house our activities. These places and things establish relations among each other, between themselves and dwellers, and between dwellers and the surrounding environment" (136). Queen respatializes and finds order from chaos and confusion by making places and things. She also creates a space for Bride to identify with her traditional culture. As Young notes, "'the idea of home and the practices of home-making support personal and collective identity in a more fluid and material sense'" (164). Morrison uses Bride's perspective to describe Queen's homemaking practices, which reveals Bride's recognition of the value of this homemaking practice for supporting personal identity, extending Queen's spatial practice into an agentic force on Bride and thus supporting "personal and collective identity." It becomes a home, in hooks's words, that "affirm[s] our beings, our blackness, our love for one another" (46).

The culinary tradition in Queen's home symbolizes difference; it is "diasporic homemaking" as it "fosters and recasts connections over translational space through, for example, domestic architecture, particular objects within the home, and the domestic preparation and consumption of food" (Blunt and Dowling 313). By mixing a variety of ingredients and using different cooking styles from

her husbands, she creates a diversity of rich flavors that "symbolizes the hope of maintaining a heterogeneous space where difference is tolerated" (Silini and Majdoubeh 89). Queen's homemaking practices show how a home can be decolonized and turned into a space where difference is celebrated and heterogeneity is respected. With Queen's meals being described as "manna" (Morrison, *God* 145), Bride's journey here is likened to the biblical Exodus. Queen's home, where things are uniquely mismatched and oddly placed, and meals are cooked from a mishmash of recipes, is a heterogenous place where Bride learns to become more encompassing. The home charms Bride with its orderliness and comfort, serving as the space where Booker's poems about her finally reach her, allowing both to find spiritual harmony and reconciliation. Queen's home becomes a microcosm of the "diasporic home" through the "mixing and reworking of traditions and cultures" (Blunt and Dowling 262).

Toward the end of *God Help the Child*, Bride and Booker imagine a home in the form of a connection: "Then he offered her the hand she had craved all her life, . . . [and] each of them began to imagine what the future would certainly be" (175). This spatial imagination of home evokes intimacy and belonging. The home imagined here is a "spatial imaginary," or "a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings" (Blunt and Dowling 9), "processes of establishing connections with others and creating a sense of order and belonging as *part of* rather than *separate from* society" (15). The gold discs passed down by Queen signify Bride's inheritance of African motherhood and her becoming a "real person . . . a thinking one" (Morrison, *God* 158). She is whole physically, with the return of her once-vanished piercing hole, and psychologically, after unmooring herself from the racialized and gendered space in the anti-capitalist, anti-racist, heterogenous environment of Whiskey.

In *The Vanishing Half*, Jude's attitude toward her body reflects her changing sense of self. Initially, she is somewhat repulsed by her Black body. The inner shame and denial of her body can be seen most obviously in relation to her boyfriend, Reese, and her reaction to the strangers from whom she tries to hide her body. In Mallard, Jude "never dared to swim in the river—imagine showing so much of yourself" (Bennett, *Vanishing* 141). Jude leaves the town as soon as she "rescued herself" through the sport of running, which not only provides an outlet from societal rejection—allowing her to feel "less black, less anything"—but also earns her a scholarship to attend college in California (100). Her flight from Mallard links back to fugitive flight during slavery, as "the act of running away is always composed as a counterpoint to apparatuses of capture" (Bona 39). Despite Los Angeles's mobility and liberating effect, she still cannot accept her Black body, as she still "pictured sunbathers laughing as soon as she tugged off her shirt" (Bennett, *Vanishing* 141). Although Desiree predicts that Jude will "never come back to Mallard" (94) due to topophobia, Jude does return at the end of the novel. The tension between her determination to escape the town and

her eventual homecoming makes the scene more symbolic and meaningful. She returns to Mallard to attend her grandmother's funeral. After the funeral, the townsfolk expect to see "Mallard's lost daughter" (388), but Jude vanishes again:

> But they did not find her amongst the dead. She had slipped out the back door with her boyfriend, holding his hand as they ran through the woods toward the river. The sun was beginning to set, and under the tangerine sky, Reese tugged his undershirt over his head. The sun warmed his chest, still paler than the rest of him. In time, his scars would fade, his skin darkening. She would look at him and forget that there had ever been a time he'd hidden from her.
>
> He unzipped her funeral dress, folding it neatly on a rock, and they waded into the cold water, squealing, water inching up their thighs. This river, like all rivers, remembered its course. They floated under the leafy canopy of trees, begging to forget. (389)

These paragraphs juxtapose the Mallard residents' expectation of seeing Jude and her desire to escape the town. Nature seems to become the only space for Jude to build her defense against prying eyes as she "slipped out of the back door" and "ran through the woods toward the river." The narrator describes the pair's sensory experience of the color and warmth of nature and how it leads to Reese's physical and psychological healing: "The sun warmed his chest . . . his scars would fade, his skin darkening," and "she would look at him and forget that there had ever been a time he'd hidden from her." With Reese's physical transformation and acceptance of his body, their relationship blossoms from hiding to mutual acceptance.

This final scene, in which they take off their funeral clothes and walk into the cold water of a river in rural Louisiana, lends itself to multiple interpretations. Morgado reads it as "a scene that stands for a baptism of self-acceptance" (85), as Jude dares to swim naked for the first time in the river of Mallard; however, Reznick suggests that their swimming unseen by others during sunset adds an element of gloom to the positive note of the partial acceptance of their bodies (280). We contend that this scene has an overtone of cleansing and healing from the traumatic past. This happens as they establish a harmonious relationship and mutual interaction with the environment as "they [wade] into the cold water," which "inch[es] up their thighs." Anissa Janine Wardi notes that water, "one of the central tropes in the African American literary and historical tradition" (3), offers "physical and psychic healing" (28), and encounters with water "function as both confrontations with traumatic memory and rites of healing" (19). Read in this light, this scene evokes a catharsis or baptism, "underscoring river water as healing, renewing, and, most significantly, transformative" (65). This transformation emerges through Jude and Reese's reciprocal interactions with the river, suggesting a broader human-environment relationship that operates on equal terms. The leafy canopy of the trees above Jude and Reese creates a sense of sanctuary, refuge, and retreat. The tension between the permanent memory of the river and Jude and Reese's "begging to forget" denotes the healing power of nature.

Conclusion

In an interview, Bennett talks about how Black women's disproportionate struggles are often overlooked and stresses how much she thinks about the specific threats Black women experience when moving through the world ("Author"). Through various spaces and places, Morrison and Bennett carefully render the complexities of identity and pursuit of self by representing Bride's and Jude's spatial anxieties and embodied spatial experience. Racism and sexism are embedded in spaces to produce gendered and racialized geographies, perpetuating dominant ideologies by keeping Black women in subordinate places and naturalizing the link between space and identity. These geographies of domination engender heightened spatial anxiety in both the Black women protagonists, including a sense of homelessness at home and a pervasive anxiety or topophobia in unhomely spaces. Their pervasive spatial anxieties translate into self-hatred and loathing of Blackness, further informing their senses of self. By applying Tally's concept of topophrenia and McKittrick's geographies of domination, this study explores the link between racialized and gendered geography, between Black women's embodied space and their identities. By foregrounding the importance of geographical and cultural contexts in shaping personal and collective identities, this spatially nuanced approach "could supplement and reconstitute the psychoanalytic and phenomenological perspectives" (Tally, *Spatiality* 9) and links the physical/spatial sphere and the psychoanalytic aspect of identity.

The interplay between different scales of space—home, the city, and the rural—along with Black women's spatial anxieties and identities can be observed in both *God Help the Child* and *The Vanishing Half*. In analyzing this interplay, we uncover the intertextualities at work in the two novels. Morrison's and Bennett's representations of space and spatial anxieties manifest the authors' cartographic anxieties and topophrenia to narrate and imagine alternative spatialities for Black women in seemingly post-racial societies. Home represents an unhomely space, which evokes feelings of topophobia that reveal how the legacy of colonialism still plagues Black communities. While these works follow the "pro-urban tradition" of Black American literature by portraying the city as a place of liberation with lesser constraints (Hakutani and Butler 9), they also show different degrees of ambivalence and doubt by depicting the city's commodification of, and Black women's lack of acceptance of, their bodies. By portraying Black women's self-acceptance in a rural setting, Morrison and Bennett challenge assumptions that link rural life with the "slavery and post-Civil War forms of racial discrimination" (11) in literature.

Morrison adopts a historical and cultural perspective while Bennett reflects the modern quest for freedom and identity. Both works, published during heightened awareness and activism surrounding race, identity, and systematic

injustice, reflect ongoing social challenges and evolving discussions about race and identity. Through reconstructing the home, the urban, and the rural as significant spaces for Jude and explorations of colorism, mobility, and nature, Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* revisits, revises, and pays homage to Morrison's *God Help the Child*. By retreating to a time before Bride was born, Jude forms a prequel of sorts for Bride and offers harsh criticisms of racist policies under modern liberalism, interrogating the idea of a post-racial United States. In examining Bennett's engagement with Morrison's literary legacy, this study contributes to the ongoing exploration of Morrison's work and African American women's literary voice in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, most minority groups in the United States, especially African Americans, experience disproportionately higher rates of homelessness. Representing 13% of the population, African Americans account for 37% of people experiencing homelessness ("Homelessness").
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty rejects the mind-body dichotomy and emphasizes the centrality of embodiment. The body, according to Merleau-Ponty, is "the vehicle of being in the world" and the access point to space, as "I am conscious of my body through the world" and "I am conscious of the world by means of my body" (84). This sense of embodiment refers to people's perceptions, awareness, and consciousness of their bodies in relation to the surrounding environments. Iris Young explores the link between a sense of embodiment and women's sense of space as not their own due to the threat of being seen and evaluated by objectifying eyes (qtd. in Rose 146). Gillian Rose further argues that our awareness of our bodies as an object to be looked at turns space into "an alien territory" that "feel[s] like a thousand piercing eyes" (146). This sense of embodiment decides our perception of and psychological and emotional response to space and place.
3. A thorough analysis of the interplay between geography and identity in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) and *God Help the Child* (2015) is still lacking. Scholarship on Brit Bennett's novel focuses mainly on the trope of racial passing and the intricate nature of identity and race surrounding the twins Stella and Desiree. Olivia Mohtady focuses on how Stella escapes racism through white passing and the tradition of racial passing from a postcolonial and psychological perspective. Hyoung Min Lee analyzes the unconventional passing narrative structure and argues that this novel formulates the tactile as an essential way of knowing the self and the Other. Ohad Reznick studies the performance of identity and the limitations of performativity by analyzing Stella's racial passing and her daughter Kennedy's acting career. Rashad Mohammed Moqbel Al Areqi focuses on Desiree's and Stella's choice of racial identity and the transformation

of their lives. While identity remains central to scholarship on Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*, the interplay between spatiality and identity has received limited attention. For example, Roumaïssa Silini and Ahmad Majdoubeh investigate the racist production of hegemonic space through the commodification of the Black body and Morrison's antidote of "embracing blackness as a sign of difference," while Hana Bougherira argues that geography shapes Bride's psychological state, discussing the link between Bride's geographical journey and her metaphorical journey of self-discovery.

4. Edward Soja, an urban theorist and geographer, theorizes *thirdspace* by drawing on Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, Michel Foucault's heterotopias, postcolonial studies, and feminist ideas. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), Soja analyzes the urban space of Los Angeles as a model of his thirdspace. Soja's heterotopology of thirdspace is an all-inclusive space that encompasses both possibilities and dangers, a completely open space, real and imagined, on the periphery and at the center simultaneously, a product of a "thirding" of the spatial imagination.

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