Article

"Wait, is she Black?": Unsuccessful White Pass in Tiffany D. Jackson's *The Weight of Blood*

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Abstract

In this article, we study Tiffany D. Jackson's novel *The Weight of Blood* (2022) as a neo-passing narrative that interrogates the colour-blind ideology and the idea of a post-racial society. By focussing on the biracial character of Maddy Washington, we explore the necessity of white passing in contemporary American society and examine her challenges after her unsuccessful attempt at passing. We aim to show that, despite the false claims of post-racialism, racial predicaments are still intact in American society in the 21st century. To offer a better analysis of the novel, we draw upon W.E.B. Du Bois's notions of the "colour-line" and "double consciousness." Du Bois's theories enable us to further explore the black-white racial hierarchies and dichotomies, as well as the persistence of colour-blindness within today's American society.

Keywords

Tiffany D. Jackson, the weight of blood, racial passing, neo-passing narratives, post-racialism, colour-blind ideology, double consciousness

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Introduction

In the early 1950s, African American *Jet* magazine declared that passing would soon become obsolete. The article states that "[w]ith the advent of better race relations there has been a corresponding decrease in the number of Negroes forsaking their race to become white" (Jet, 1952, p. 12). The onset of the Civil Rights Movement undoubtedly fuelled these aspirations; however, as the subsequent decades have revealed, American society continues to solidify the pre-Civil Rights racial stratification and operate on deeply rooted racial hierarchies. As "race and racism still persist" (Hobbs, 2018, p. 51), the enduring significance of passing and neo-passing narratives that confront racial hierarchies becomes increasingly apparent.

Neo-passing narratives of today, like Tiffany D. Jackson's *The Weight of Blood* (2022), aim to show that, despite the false assumption of a post-racial society, racial predicaments are still intact in the 21st century. Such narratives problematise post-racialism, which, according to Christel N. Temple, creates "inaccurate assumptions about African-American identity" and suggests that "African-Americans have finally achieved racial equality" (Temple, 2010, p. 45). Temple truly posits that "[p]ost-racial rhetoric [. . .] is misrepresented as a variable of diversity, when in reality the term's usage in spaces of public sentiment does not indicate pluralism" (Temple, 2010, p. 46). Consequently, "African-American identity and heritage practices decrease, rather than increase" (Temple, 2010, p. 46). These remarks underscore the significance of addressing ongoing racial issues rather than declaring them resolved.

Jackson's *The Weight of Blood*, which critiques the fantasy of post-racialism, stands as a vital contribution to this emerging body of neo-passing narratives. The novel is perceived as "a spirited urge to critically examine the layers of intentional complications surrounding racial identity, passing, colourism, and the consequences of misinformation" (Balderson, 2022, p. 89). By situating passing in a contemporary context, Jackson highlights how institutional racism, colourism, and discrimination in our time necessitate passing, shifting the focus from individual deception to collective accountability. This thematic concern situates *The Weight of Blood* in a very long line of African American passing novels, ranging from Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), in which Rena Walden passes white in the post-Civil War South but suffers social and personal ruin upon being uncovered, through Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), in which Angela Murray's passing for white in pursuit of an artistic career ultimately confronts her with moral and emotional challenges. By the same token, Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) follows Clare Kendry's white-passing, privileged life that teeters on perpetual peril and ends in disaster. The

tradition carried over into the Civil Rights era in Frank Yerby's *The Dahomean* (1971), which, while mostly a historical novel, recruits the theme of identity disguise to navigate overwhelming power structures, attesting to the expansive popular appeal of passing across different social spheres. Passing in all these works is a deliberate act based on adapting to system colour-line inhibitions. While other literary works locate passing in the marital, occupational, or prolonged social ascent worlds, Jackson confines the action to the high-wire social world of adolescence, infusing the genre with contemporary racial politics.

As a reimagining of Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974)[1] through a contemporary racial lens, the novel exposes the psychic and societal challenges that biracial individuals face in colour-conscious America; challenges that are not alleviated by proximity to whiteness but are instead amplified by it. Like *Carrie*, *The Weight of Blood* offers a framework for the exploration of racial passing, hidden power, and social privilege. By drawing on King's novel, Jackson highlights the ways in which social privilege operates by enforcing invisibility on marginalised subjects. Just as Carrie White is policed into invisibility by a community that punishes any deviation from the "idealised normal" girl, Maddy Washington is pressured to uphold the illusion of whiteness in a town that insists on colour-blindness while sustaining racial hierarchies. In this climate, Jackson's youth fiction aims to expose the contradictions of contemporary racial ideologies, particularly the myth of colour-blindness, and reveal the unfinished nature of America's racial project in the 21st century.

In this article, we analyse *The Weight of Blood* as a neo-passing narrative that critically examines the colour-blind ideology and challenges the illusion of post-racial progress. Through the lens of the main biracial character, Maddy, we argue that racism remains deeply embedded in contemporary American society, and that the myth of post-racialism is fundamentally inadequate in addressing, let alone eradicating, its ongoing realities. We also examine the passer's identity dualism and crisis and navigate her experience within a liminal space. The analysis is enriched by W.E.B. Du Bois's concepts of the "colour-line" and "double consciousness." Du Bois's theories enable us to further explore the dynamics of race formation, black-white racial hierarchies, and dichotomies, as well as the persistence of colourism within today's American society.

Living the Veil and Colour-Line

In *The Weight of Blood*, Maddy's predicament mirrors the complexities of race construction and what it means to be suddenly raced in contemporary America. The narrative's conflicts arise from the juxtaposition of Maddy's racial

self-classification and her observed race. This contrast between two racial realisations relates back to Du Bois's theory of double consciousness. Du Bois conceptualises the African American existence as having "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings: two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 3), capturing the internal conflict produced by living in a culture that denies a sense of belonging. As a result of this duality, black Americans are, he writes, "shut out from their [white Americans'] world by a vast veil" (Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 3), rendered invisible and excluded from the dominant cultural and social sphere. Veronica T. Watson further explains Du Boisian double-consciousness as "the two-ness that is born when one's self-understanding collides with social constructions of race that limit one's ability to actualise one's vision of the self" (Watson, 2013, p. 16).

While double consciousness has been foundational in understanding passing narratives, where individuals navigate the conflict between self-perception and the perceptions imposed by a racist society, *The Weight of Blood* demands a re-examination of this concept. In traditional passing narratives, characters are often acutely aware of their duality and strategically manage their public selves to survive or succeed. They possess a degree of agency in shaping their double consciousness, even as it creates profound psychological strain. They experience an agonising but conscious split. However, Maddy initially lacks the knowledge even to recognise her own racial complexity, resulting in a deeper alienation from herself, and she inhabits a coercive form of double consciousness. *The Weight of Blood* portrays passing as an externally imposed condition, one rooted in parental control rather than individual ambition. Maddy does not choose to pass. Rather, her biracial identity is forcibly suppressed by her father, Thomas, who "thought he could control his child's destiny" (Jackson, 2022, p. 360). This dynamic represents a shift from earlier passing narratives, in which protagonists typically pursued the advantages associated with whiteness. In contrast, Jackson's novel adds a critical dimension to the genre of neo-passing by illuminating the complex challenges faced by biracial individuals in contemporary America. The novel also demonstrates how double consciousness in the 21st century emerges not only through social exclusion but also through the internalisation of racial self-erasure.

In applying Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, it is important to refine its application to biraciality. Since *The Weight of Blood* explores the racial tension between black and white, we consider that, by extension, "American" identity itself is implicitly tied to whiteness, positioning the duality not just as a racial struggle but as a critique of the way American national identity has historically been constructed around white ideals. In this context, the novel not only embodies the tension between black and white

racial identities but also highlights the stereotypical realisation that "being American" is equated with being white. This interpretation underscores the complex relationship between race and citizenship in a society where racial and national identities are deeply intertwined. By drawing on Du Bois's framework of double consciousness, we can better understand Maddy's struggle as a reflection of a broader social irony: the expectation that being American is to be white, and the resulting alienation that biracial individuals, like Maddy, experience.

In *The Weight of Blood*, double consciousness is woven in a dual manner, in which Maddy looks at herself both before and after her failed passing. To the outside and before the racial discovery, Maddy has existed as a white American teenager, and under her father's influence, she has not thought of herself as "anything other than being white" (Jackson, 2022, p. 86). Hence, there is no defining moment of Maddy seeing "the veil," while she has been raised under its ominous presence from the start. However, after the racial passing fiasco, the passer becomes fully conscious of the omnipresent "vast veil" and identifies with blackness and acknowledges the other half of her identity. She feels her blackness through constant insults, such as "You're a mess! A disgusting mess" (Jackson, 2022, p. 42), which mares Maddy's self-esteem and skews her view on race. As a result, Maddy is no longer colour-blind, and she is constantly reminded of the twoness of a black-white racial divide within herself. Her perception of one's self clashes with societal constructs of race, forcing her to come to terms with the reality that her mixed-race identity has located her within the confines of the veil, and her "sleeping monster" (Jackson, 2022, p. 7) of her hair keeps her firmly under the veil.

It is worth noting that in African American literature, the issue of hair frequently emerges as a marker of racial and cultural identity.[2] Hair, particularly for African American women, reflects racist attitudes towards beauty standards, defined based on Eurocentric features. Sensitivity to Maddy's hair in this neo-passing novel illustrates that racial markers, such as hair, still continue to significantly influence one's social positioning in today's American society, revealing the unfulfilled promises of post-racialism. Within this racial landscape, biracials with certain phenotypes such as coarse hair rarely embrace a monoracial white identity, which is largely due to the one-drop-rule[3] (Davenport, 2018, p. 86). Lauren Davenport describes the biracial identity as having "a type of Du Boisian double-consciousness" where the biracial individuals "seek to reconcile [. . .] their dual racial heritages, neither of which they feel thoroughly a part" (Davenport, 2018, p. 166). Likewise, Maddy is apprehensive to view herself as anything but white, even though "the lie sat crooked on her skin" (Jackson, 2022, p. 87). She is not certain if her white identity is a mask or part of her real identity.

The twoness is further perceived while she looks at herself in the mirror and asks: "Was she really a minority?" (Jackson, 2022, p. 86). She challenges the rigidity of the labels "white" and "black," seeking answers through her physical appearance. Notably, Maddy exclusively considers two monoracial labels rather than exploring their combination, which indicates a fixed perception of racial identity. She draws our attention to "internal energies and external forces which play crucial roles in 'recycling' and reshaping our identities [which] become kaleidoscopic, situational and contradictory" (Ghasemi, 2016, p. 9). Because identity is an ever-evolving process wherein labels are assimilated and later discarded, the process of reconciliation is lengthy and sometimes enduring an entire lifetime. Maddy has been denied the chance to freely explore her biracial identity, and her lack of opportunity to explore her identities leaves her in a chaos of conflicting and intersecting manifestations of race. In this situation, she encounters her "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 3), which proves challenging to reconcile.

Julia S. Charles explains that biracial individuals often occupy a "middle world," where their identity is neither fully black nor fully white, but instead shaped by the societal pressures and historical contexts (Charles, 2013). Despite living in the supposed post-racial era, Maddy's experience reflects this middle space, where her racial identity is in constant oscillation between the demands of her guardian's worldview and her own complex sense of self. Michele Elam believes that "The mixed-race subject occupies a position of in-betweenness, constantly negotiating the racial boundaries of the larger society while simultaneously forging new meanings of racial identity from within" (Elam, 2011, p. 102). Maddy's journey of passing as white and the subsequent discovery of her blackness places her within this space, where her racial identity is continually redefined by external forces and her internal reckoning.

Upon racialisation, Maddy encounters Du Bois's question of "how does it feel to be a problem?" (Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 2). In the enduring backdrop of racial tensions in America, being categorised as black often equates to being seen as a societal problem. With racial identity comes a stigma that she was not accustomed to before. She needs to overcome her father's notion that she is only an "abomination" who does not "belong . . . anywhere" (Jackson, 2022, p. 288). This shows that racism is not over even in the 21st century, but it hides under the cloak of post-racialism as a hegemonic ideology (Gines, 2014, p. 83). Given that the father's teachings form the bedrock of Maddy's racial mindset, the realisation that her ancestry is steeped in anger burdens her heavily. Maddy's racialisation not only turns her into a problem for the white population of Springville but also causes trouble for the black-passing people of the town. As Du Bois aptly expresses, this situation is uniquely challenging, even for someone who has never experienced anything different

(Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 2). She experiences, for the first time, what it means to be viewed as raced when her hair "arrived in the classroom before she did" (Jackson, 2022, p. 9). After the disclosure of her secret, she becomes literally and metaphorically the "giant sculpture in the middle of US history" (Jackson, 2022, p. 12), showing that the country has failed to cure this long-term ailment. This is why the revelation of the secret "still tasted bitter" (Jackson, 2022, p. 185). Even though "a weight [of her secret] had been lifted" (Jackson, 2022, p. 185), Maddy must deal with another kind of weight, "the weight of blood" (Jackson, 2022, p. 100).

"Blood" in the title of the novel also foregrounds the enduring symbolic and social significance of another marker of racial identity, and a closer analysis of this symbolism is vital to understanding the novel's critique of contemporary racism. Throughout American history, blood has functioned as a biological construct to enforce racial boundaries. Maddy's revelation as biracial exposes how "blood" still operates as an invisible but heavy burden, determining her social position regardless of her upbringing or self-conception. Jackson's choice of title aims to complicate this historical legacy, which still persists even when the biological basis for it has been widely discredited, and Maddy's experience demonstrates that even in an allegedly post-racial society, racial identity remains an inescapable structure that disciplines bodies and lives.

In a society that reinforces racial hierarchies, opting to identify as white is deemed "a bold racial statement" (Davenport, 2018, 167) and "an act with very real political ramifications" (Davenport, 2016, p. 60). In this context, Maddy's racial passing can be viewed as an anti-black attitude. Kali, who is an active member of the school's Black Student Union, wonders that "[c]ould she make [. . .] peace with a girl pretending to be white?" (Jackson, 2022, p. 260). Here, Maddy experiences double consciousness anew, facing disdain from white individuals and resentment from black ones. In his writing, Du Bois phrases the simple wish to be both black and American "without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 3; capital as in original). Maddy's question "[w]ould anyone believe her?" (Jackson, 2022, p. 87) further signifies these "two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 3), which is the outcome of colourism.

Colourism is the manifestation of racism based on the contrasting definitions of whiteness as superior and blackness as inferior. Historically, "light-skinned people received privileges and resources that were otherwise unattainable to their darker-skinned counterparts" (Hunter, 2007, p. 239). Maddy's light complexion grants her a certain proximity to whiteness, which differentiates her experiences from Kali's. However, as Allyson Hobbs states,

"mixed-race identities are still raced identities" that are set apart from whiteness (Hobbs, 2018, p. 50). Maddy's new existence on the colour-line creates an altogether new double consciousness inside her, while she still struggles to set herself free from her previous performance directed by her parent. She must reconcile her inherent twoness that challenges her rigid view of race and find agency in the in-between state, wherein she is racialised – by the one-drop-rule assigned "black" – while simultaneously benefitting from white privilege in her community.

The Fall of the Façade

To inspire racial passing aspirations in his daughter, Thomas decorates Maddy's closet with images of white mid-century women. The closet functions symbolically as a space of self-alienation, and Maddy is enclosed ideologically by images of "idealised" whiteness. For Maddy, though, the closet has become a place of double-consciousness. She readily discerns the disparities between herself and the white, blonde women with blue eyes in the pictures, further deepening her sense of two-ness. In this environment, Maddy frequently oscillates between two opposing races, classes, and cultures, and hence, she does not feel whole. She is entangled in drawing comparisons between herself and those women, who make her conscious of their differences. Du Bois refers to this double life as "a puzzling dilemma," making African Americans ask: "What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both?" (Du Bois, 1995, p. 22). In a similar manner, Maddy faces such a puzzling dilemma in her life, challenges with her identity dilemma, and struggles to reconcile her identity duality.

Like his daughter, Thomas suffers from double consciousness both before and after Maddy is racialised. He does not view her daughter as white, despite his counterintuitive strivings to create an ideal white girl out of her. He, who does not acknowledge Maddy as a monoracially white, always advises his daughter to "*Stay away from the Negros; they're dangerous. Stay out of the sun. Protect your hair at all costs. No one can know. No one can ever know!*" (Jackson, 2022, p. 100; emphasis in original). His advice clearly manifests the interactions of "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" within him (Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 3). Thomas also makes a racial distinction between Maddy and the women on the closet walls, and this distinction "unveils a sense of twoness which brings about internal conflicts" for him (Ghasemi, 2020, p. 5).

As the novel reads, on the day Maddy's secret is unveiled, the gaze of these women in the pictures "hurt more than anything that had happened that day"

(Jackson, 2022, p. 44), and their lifeless smiling gazes lead the passer to perceive herself as inferior. Here, double consciousness manifests itself as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois, 2007 [1903], p. 3). Maddy thinks that "[s]he would never be good enough or white enough. For him [her father]. For the kids at school. For the women plastered on her closet walls. She hated them. All of them. Why couldn't she be like them? (Jackson, 2022, p. 95). The protagonist's rage and hatred hint at a nascent awareness of the external forces shaping her self-image, and her words manifest the presence of two active, unreconciled strivings, which make her look at herself through the eyes of her father, school children, and even the women in the pictures. As a result, she feels secluded from the white Americans by the veil of colour, which minimises the relationships between the racialising white Americans and the racialised non-white ones. Paul Gilroy calls this conflicting condition an "unhappy symbiosis" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 127), illustrating a contradictory relationship that arise from the racial divide wherein both racial parties are intertwined yet estranged from each other.

It is worth noting that social class and wealth play a crucial role in the success of racial passing. What keeps Maddy from successfully crossing the colour-line is her social class. Davenport argues that "whitening is a form of boundary-crossing," and "[m]oney has a robust whitening effect on racial identification," which stems from the correlation between colourism, racism, and classism in America (Davenport, 2018, p. 166). While one's higher social class would guarantee the success of their racial passing, the act of racial passing, per se, serves as a means for the practitioners to elevate their social class. To this end, Thomas urges his daughter to practice boundary-crossing. His fury and concern following the revelation of the secret display his disappointment, showing that "passing does more harm than good" (Dawkins, 2018, p. 176). His reflection – "If they treated her that way believing she was white, who knew what they'd do if they knew the truth?" (Jackson, 2022, p. 152), and demand from Maddy, "You want to bring shame upon this family? [. . .] How could you do this to me?" (Jackson, 2022, p. 42) – imply that his aspirations to improve their social standing have been thwarted, and their proximity to blackness through Maddy further excludes or disconnects them from societal acceptance.

In *The Weight of Blood*, whiteness is enacted, and hence, Maddy's experience of passing as white is not just a literal or racial transformation but a performance, a constructed identity that she performs in response to the pressures of the environment. Charles sees "passing [as] a performance that is both socially constructed and reliant on the performer's ability to embody a set of expectations – racial, cultural, and political" (Charles, 2013, p. 65).

Maddy's internalised performance of whiteness can be viewed through this lens, as her actions reflect the power dynamics of race and identity within her segregated hometown. As Lauren Kuryloski notes, "If a passer can convincingly perform the identity of their choosing, such a performance implies the constructed nature of all identity categories" (Kuryloski, 2019, p. 31). For Maddy, the act of passing is not a biological reality but a social role that she is taught to emulate in order to gain acceptance and safety in a racially divided community. Her adoption of a white identity involves more than just changes in her physical appearance, such as straightening her hair, speaking in a certain manner, and conforming to white cultural norms. These are deliberate performances that enable her to navigate the boundaries of race and claim a space within a white-dominated society. While Maddy outwardly performs as white, she identifies as black at her core, which generates the sense of double-consciousness.

As the novel reveals, Maddy is aware that her performative identity is "a lie" (Jackson, 2022, p. 87), which entails privilege. In a world where racial categorisations remain intact, passing is simultaneously enticing and challenging. To describe the challenge, Kali, who has a darker complexion, states: "we can't take our skin off at night like it's a costume or straighten our hair to blend in. if we could, thousands of us would still be alive today!" (Jackson, 2022, p. 223). Kali's statement challenges the veracity of a post-racial society and highlights the limitations associated with altering one's race and identity. In the context of race theory and racial passing, it also signifies the deep-seated privilege of white race and the tragic consequences of that race privilege that have resulted in the torment and death of members of other races. In this regard, Linda Schlossburg argues that passing is "fundamentally conservative," because "although it may often represent social progress for an individual, it generally holds larger social hierarchies firmly in place" (Schlossburg, 2001, p. 3). In this light, Jackson's *The Weight of Blood* serves as a poignant reminder of the profound consequences of racial-class hierarchies and the systemic inequalities embedded within contemporary American society, which urges members of non-white society to bear the bitter consequences of racial passing.

Here, we should note that the multifaceted nature of biracial identity in America is not only reflected in literary texts but also represented in cultural contexts. Yaba Blay's photo critique *One Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race* (2013) offers a visual and scholarly examination of the "one-drop rule" and its effects on the perception of biracial identities. Blay's work underscores the rigid racial categorisations that often force individuals into defined identities, resonating with Jackson's portrayal of the protagonist's struggles. In her

Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair (1997), Lisa Jones specifically addresses these issues through the lens of public figures like Mariah Carey, whose racial identity and experience of passing echo the same themes in Jackson's novel. It is worth noting that the discourse surrounding biracial identity extends to prominent figures such as Meghan Markle, who have publicly navigated their mixed-race identities amidst societal expectations. Meghan Markle's personal reflections on her hairstyle parallel the themes that Jackson explores, highlighting the everyday choices biracial individuals make to conform or resist the societal norms. Furthermore, Lacey Schwartz's documentary *Little White Lies* (2014) further amplifies the conversation on passing and racial identity. Schwartz's personal story of discovering her African American heritage after being raised as white provides a powerful narrative that aligns with Jackson's exploration of identity and self-discovery. White parents' reluctance to categorise their biracial children as "Black," adhering to the antiquated one-drop rule, underscores the persistent challenges in defining and accepting biracial identities. Jackson's selection of this topic in this novel likely draws from these rich cultural and societal influences, reflecting the nuanced realities of biracial individuals and the continuum of their challenges today.

Post-Race: A "Carefully Crafted Façade"

As the novel shows, Maddy's failed pass and the aftermath of it shake the very core of the Springville community. Springville, a microcosm of American society, continues the reinvention of racism behind its "carefully crafted façade" of post-racialism (Jackson, 2022, p. 35). The town is described to have been an idyllic Southern town "true to its Bible Belt roots" where "racism was passed down like family jewels" (Jackson, 2022, pp. 42 & 45). This portrayal of the town's persistent racism resonates with the sentiment expressed in Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's opening sentence in his book *Racism without Racists*: "This book, like Freddy Kruger, refuses to die" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. xiii). With a reference to Freddy Kruger, the antagonist of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* film series, Bonilla-Silva parallels the racial landscape of the USA with an evil force that keeps coming back to life, no matter the efforts to destroy it. Amid this recurring cycle, race-making revolves around a simple non-white / white binary legacy of the one-drop rule.

In *The Weight of Blood*, the process of racial categorisation is disrupted when Maddy, who has carefully crafted, presented, and preserved her edited self for a while (Dawkins, 2018, p. 175), is exposed as non-white. The initial confusion that Maddy's disclosure creates is evident in her classmates'

reactions such as "Wait, is she Black?" (Jackson, 2022, p. 13), or "Can Black girls really look that . . . white?" (Jackson, 2022, p. 32). Michael Omi and Howard Winant note that "we utilise race to provide clues about *who* a person is," and when they fail to align with our observations, we encounter a momentary "crisis of racial meaning" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 126; emphasis in original). As such, race often serves as a primary factor in perceiving individuals and making sense of their identities and social levels. When individuals' appearance contradicts our perceptions or stereotypes associated with their race, it can cause a temporary disruption in our ability to attribute meaning to their racial identities. This is the source of confusion for Maddy's peers, stemming from their inability to reconcile her racial identity with their preconceived notions or stereotypes.

Furthermore, race-making "can also be understood as a process of othering" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 105). The "othering" of Maddy happens instantly right after the disclosure of her secret, and she falls into the category of otherness. The category of white must be re-evaluated to stay "pure" and true to the one-drop rule; and accordingly, her white peers are quick to categorise her as black and keep distance from her. Previously, she used to be just an outcast and an easy target for bullies, called "Mad Mad Maddy" (Jackson, 2022, p. 9). However, after the rain and revelation of her true racial background, she is labelled "Mad Mad Maddy with the Mad Mad Hair" (Jackson, 2022, p. 9). Additionally, she is described as someone who is "more hair than human" (Jackson, 2022, p. 9). This phrase, which draws attention to human and non-human duality, reminds readers of a dehumanising racial stereotype, reflecting historical biases against certain racial or ethnic groups with hair textures that deviate from Eurocentric norms. Such stereotypes pave the way for the formation of racial othering and exoticisation, particularly for individuals such as Maddy who deviate from dominant cultural norms and are depicted as less human. In such a racist environment, her classmates' reactions make her internalise otherness, racial oppression, and inferiority.

Despite such racist reaction to Maddy, the townspeople of Springville claim the title of "colour-blindness." The inability or lack of interest in critically examining their own privilege, a hallmark of the colour-blind ideology, becomes apparent in their debates about the possibility of holding an integrated prom. Jason, a white student, expresses his opposition to the organisation of a segregated prom by stating that "Prom is about tradition" (Jackson, 2022, p. 91). He attempts to justify his position by saying, "just because I don't want to combine proms doesn't make me a racist [. . .]. And I don't even see colour. [. . .] You don't think I wanna party with my brother Kenny? Of course, I do! But it's about tradition!" (Jackson, 2022, pp. 92–93). His claim illustrates how some traditions have also been established along colour lines, making white

students accustomed to racial segregation from a young age. Jason acknowledges the existence of a vast veil, which has shut out the black Americans from their white counterparts in their so-called post-racial community, when he declares that "we lived parallel lives, never intersecting [. . .]. White kids hung out with white kids, Black kids with Black kids" (Jackson, 2022, p. 72). Here, the idea of organising an integrated prom disrupts the race-making practices of the townspeople and destabilises their colour-blind front by exposing its underlying racial divisions, and the white people are quick to re-cement their strict racial categories by invoking tradition.

Moreover, Jules' appearance in the Halloween party in blackface, wearing "a giant Afro wig" and a sign around her neck reading *Hello, my name is Maddy*," further highlight the divide between the two parties (Jackson, 2022, p. 107; emphasis in original). The protest of black students, however, is described as "somewhat militant in their approach" (Jackson, 2022, p. 116). Haney-López states that, "for those committed to preserving the racial status quo, the new spirit of widespread antiracism raises practical and ideological problems" (Haney-Lopez, 2006, p. 144). This suggests that no strong reaction from the black party is tolerated, and by downplaying the cause for protests, the white community "stigmatises anti-racist activism" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 130). Jackson's fusion of the neo-passing narrative with horror thus offers a powerful commentary on how contemporary structures of racial blindness and privilege depend on repression, fear, and the silencing of difference.

The scene of the prom, where Maddy unleashes her supernatural powers following a racist public humiliation, functions as a narrative and symbolic eruption of all the tensions that her act of racial passing had tried to suppress. After winning the title of Prom Queen, Maddy gets a bucketful of white paint poured over her by Jules and Brady. This is reminiscent of the prom scene in *Carrie*, where Carrie gets soaked in pig blood. In both novels, the significance of the chosen substance (blood/white paint) is associated with the community's perception of the two teen girls. In *The Weight of Blood*, there is a clear racial motive behind the act, which becomes further apparent when Jules states, "Now Maddy's the white girl she always wanted to be!" (Jackson, 2022, p. 329). Maddy's powers, uncontrollable, devastating, and visually spectacular, become an embodiment of the buried realities and deep-seated racism that the town's colour-blind ideology attempts to deny. Maddy's destruction of the prom, and by extension, the town's racial rituals, is not simply a revenge but a tragic exposure to the hidden violence conducted for long behind the "carefully crafted façade" of the town's hypocrisy and false innocence. *The Weight of Blood* suggests that dismantling colourism requires a sustained and uncomfortable confrontation, something Springville, and by extension, American society, is still unwilling to fully undertake.

As the novel portrays, the consensus in the town is that everything would be alright if people would just "lighten up" (Jackson, 2022, p. 109). There is no reason to call-out inequalities, because "Blacks and whites always got along just fine – everyone knew their place" (Jackson, 2022, p. 309). In her article "Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression," Koritha Mitchell notes that "the United States remains committed to its tradition of *know-your-place aggression*" (Mitchell, 2018, p. 253; emphasis in original), which appears in numerous forms – "from microaggressions to assault, to murder – but the message is the same: certain people do not belong. They should be grateful if they are tolerated but never presume decent treatment to be their birthright" (Mitchell, 2018, p. 258). Within this continuing American tradition, "Violence is done whenever there is know-your-place aggression, no matter how subtle, and whenever whiteness is treated as if it always signifies merit" (Mitchell, 2018, p. 254). In this light, the segregation of white and black proms and the justification of such a violent marginalisation of black students can be read as a manifestation of "know-your-place aggression."

Systems of oppression rely on the subordination of marginalised groups. Society acknowledges that knowledge is power, and if the marginalised people are allowed to gain certain knowledge and self-assurance, they could eventually stop the oppressive systems. In the novel, Maddy's father denies his daughter historical knowledge and the power of "knowing oneself" (Jackson, 2022, p. 227). As Thomas says, "if Negroes knew what kind of evil you wield . . . they would've used you" (Jackson, 2022, p. 375). Such ideologies further assist the oppressive systems to keep marginalised groups subordinate and weaken the "potential to destabilise existing social hierarchies" (Kuryloski, 2019, p. 27). It is worth noting that the foundation of the colour-blind post-race ideology is that all people are equal, and they should enjoy the same opportunities. However, internal sentiments like Thomas' perpetuate the subordination of marginalised groups, preventing them from breaking free from their subordinate position. The success of this ideology is based on its covertness. Such a covert mechanism "aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, pp. 3–4). Thus, the systemic oppression persists without drawing attention to itself and operates its perpetual reinvention, contributing to the preservation of white privilege within society.

Conclusion

As the continuum of African American writers contributing to the biracial question of identities, Jackson draws attention to the persistent racial hierarchies that rule the contemporary American society, despite the declarations of

post-race. In this regard, *The Weight of Blood* acts as a neo-passing narrative, showing that contemporary American society still operates on deeply rooted racial hierarchies. By leaning into the Du Boisian double consciousness, Maddy embodies the dual nature of the mixed-race individual, who has an outward self, formed based on the ways that others see her, and an inward self, created based on her true self. As Jackson portrays, our society is built upon the binary opposition of whiteness and non-whiteness, and the existence of individuals, who confuse the binary by seemingly being able to move from one end to another, interrogates the very foundation of the said dichotomy.

From the perspectives of Black Studies, literary works such as *The Weight of Blood* prompt critical reflections on the issue of racial classification and discrimination and their impact on American society. By presenting such a common cultural challenge in youth fiction, Jackson fosters understanding and inspires action among young readers, encouraging them to examine their own perceptions of race and identity. In her interview with Moriah Richard, Jackson notes that "I think it's important specifically for young adult readers to be able to identify [the message] within the text. [. . .] I like for my readers to see it happen in real-time and then say, 'Oh, yeah, that wasn't cool'" (Richard, 2022, n.p.). This engagement is crucial in equipping the young generation with the broader implications of racial discrimination in their societies. Is the work towards a racially equal society never-ending? Can we ever declare the world post-race, or do we keep reinventing the institution of white supremacy for eternity? Du Bois writes hopefully that "surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the Veil and set the prisoners free" (Du Bois, 2007], p. 102). We can only hold onto hard work and hope, as that day has yet to dawn. For now, American society, and by extension, the entire Western world, remains at a standstill, a fact that is reflected in literary narratives such as *The Weight of Blood*.

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Notes

1. Stephen King's *Carrie* follows the life of Carrie White, an introverted, gangling outcast high school girl tormented by her classmates and repressed by her fanatically pious mother. After a humiliating encounter in the showers at school, Carrie begins to discover her telekinetic abilities. When a remorseful classmate persuades her boyfriend to ask Carrie to the prom, a group of bullies led by Chris Hargensen concoct a diabolical joke: drenching her with pig's blood during the party. The embarrassment and shock unleash Carrie's telekinetic power in full fury, creating a wave of destruction that kills dozens at the prom and devastates the town. Blending supernatural horror with psychological tragedy, the novel weaves together themes of bullying, repression, and the consequences of cruelty.
2. For instance, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the protagonist's desire for blue eyes and blonde straight hair epitomises the privilege of white beauty standards. Similarly, in Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), hair is depicted as a site of both pain and resistance, reflecting the female characters' struggles for self-acceptance. Likewise, the anthology *Blackberries and Redbones: Critical Articulations of Black Hair/Body Politics in Africana Communities* (2010), edited by Regina Spellers and Kimberly Moffitt, reflect the multifaceted experiences surrounding black hair. They underscore the ongoing struggle against beauty standards that devalue natural black hair while celebrating the resilience inherent in their hair culture.
3. Also known as the rule of hypodescent that classifies everyone with any amount of "black blood" as being black and thus subordinate to "pure white."

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