

## Confronting the Center: Exposing Systemic Racism and Whiteness through *The Hate U Give*

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Tupac Shakur's tattoo THUG LIFE, an acronym forming the phrase 'The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody,' serves as the title for Angie Thomas's debut Young Adult (YA) novel *The Hate U Give*. The rapper's refined interpretation of the term simultaneously outlines the central theme of the text: Exploring how systemic racism affects the upbringing and socialization of Black children and subsequently society as a whole. Starr Carter, the sixteen-year-old protagonist, narrates how her life unfolds after becoming the sole witness as her friend Khalil is shot by a white police officer. The narrative confronts forms of systemic racism, such as police brutality, one-sided media representations and microaggressions directed at Starr and her community. Through Starr's perspective *The Hate U Give* confronts racism and marginalization by offering what Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) has called "Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors." These concepts enable reflection of familiar, but also unfamiliar viewpoints and an engagement with the representation of such fictional worlds. The highly empathic and topical novel depicts Starr within her Black community (Garden Heights) and in the almost exclusively white context of her private high school. Her navigation of these spaces as a young Black American woman relates to the concepts of "double consciousness" (DuBois) and "triple consciousness" (Welang), which Starr describes as "flipping the switch in [her] brain." Starr's triple-marginalization necessitates an elaborate form of linguistic and cultural code-switching depending on her respective environment and interlocutors. The trauma in the wake of Khalil's shooting foregrounds Starr's contention with race and racial stereotypes, turns her into an advocate for Black Lives Matter, and empathically offers mirroring and understanding to a YA and adult readership. The novel enables an analysis of the racialized structures and stereotypes that (young) Black people are confronted with, oftentimes resulting in marginalization, discrimination and violence, topics which lend an uncanny immediacy to Thomas's YA novel.

*Keywords:* systemic anti-Black (police) violence, whiteness and ethnocentrism, marginalized young adult perspectives

### **„The Hate U Give“: Die Aufdeckung von systematischem Rassismus und Weißsein in Konfrontation mit dem hegemonischen Zentrum**

Tupac Shakurs Tattoo THUG LIFE, ein Akronym für die Phrase „The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody“, dient als Titel für Angie Thomas' Debütroman für junge Erwachsene mit dem Titel *The Hate U Give*. Die raffinierte Interpretation des Begriffs durch den Rapper

umreißt gleichzeitig das zentrale Thema des Textes: Die Erforschung der Auswirkungen von systemischem Rassismus auf die Erziehung und Sozialisierung schwarzer Kinder und in der Folge auf die Gesellschaft als Ganzes. Starr Carter, die sechzehnjährige Protagonistin, erzählt, wie sich ihr Leben entwickelt, nachdem sie als einzige Zeugin mit ansehen hat müssen, wie ihr Freund Khalil von einem weißen Polizisten erschossen wird. Die Erzählung konfrontiert Formen des systemischen Rassismus wie Polizeibrutalität, einseitige Mediendarstellungen und gegen Starr und ihre Community (Garden Heights) gerichtete Mikroaggressionen. Durch Starrs Perspektive setzt sich *The Hate U Give* mit Rassismus und Marginalisierung auseinander, indem es das anbietet, was Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) „Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors“ genannt hat. Diese Konzepte ermöglichen die Reflexion vertrauter, aber auch neuer Sichtweisen und eine Auseinandersetzung mit der Darstellung solcher fiktionaler Welten. Der einfühlsame und aktuelle Roman zeigt Starr in ihrer schwarzen Community und in dem fast ausschließlich weißen Kontext ihrer privaten High School. Wie die junge schwarze US-Amerikanerin diese Räume bereist, lässt sich mit den Konzepten der „double consciousness“ (DuBois) und der „triple consciousness“ (Welang) erklären, und Starr beschreibt den Prozess als das „Umlegen eines Schalters in [ihrem] Gehirn“. Starrs dreifache Marginalisierung erfordert eine ausgeklügelte Form des sprachlichen und kulturellen Code-Switching in Abhängigkeit von ihrer jeweiligen Umgebung und ihren Gesprächspartner\*innen. Das Trauma nach Khalils Ermordung rückt Starrs Auseinandersetzung mit Race und den dazugehörigen Stereotypen in den Vordergrund. Gleichzeitig wird sie zu einer Fürsprecherin für die *Black Lives Matter*-Bewegung, wodurch der Roman seiner jugendlichen und erwachsenen Leser\*innenschaft auf empathische Weise Möglichkeiten für Reflexion und Verständnis anbietet. *The Hate U Give* eignet sich für eine Analyse der rassistischen Strukturen und Stereotypen, mit denen (junge) schwarze Menschen im US-amerikanischen Kontext konfrontiert sind und die oft zu Ausgrenzung, Diskriminierung und Gewalt führen. Gleichsam sind es diese Themen, die Thomas' Roman für junge Erwachsene eine unheimliche Unmittelbarkeit verleihen.

*Schlagwörter:* systemische, rassistierte (Polizei-)Gewalt, Weißheit und Ethnozentrismus, Blickwinkel marginalisierter junger Erwachsener

In *The Hate U Give*<sup>1</sup> (2017),<sup>2</sup> Angie Thomas aspires to “write stories that make adults uncomfortable” (Thomas 2019) and seemingly invokes Sherman Alexie’s credo that “The Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood” by depicting 16-year-old Starr Carter. The young Black woman lives in Garden Heights, a predominantly Black neighborhood affected by interracial and intraracial discrimination and violence. The narrative unfolds as Starr witnesses her friend Khalil’s fatal shooting by a white police officer during a traffic stop without an apparent violation. The young woman’s experience of racialized police violence is complicated by the

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1 Referred to as *THUG* throughout.

2 This article recognizes that “definitions [belong] to the definers – not the defined” (Morrison 2005, 225) and are therefore problematic. The term “people of color” can be exclusionary and generalizing; it will only be used where necessary. ‘Black’ (used for African American or Black American characters in *THUG*) will be capitalized throughout to acknowledge the term’s cultural and social significance. ‘White’ and ‘whiteness’ will not be capitalized, pertaining to the terms’ capitalization among white supremacist groups, nevertheless this article wants to draw attention to ‘white’ as a race and a racialized category.

pressures of her gang-controlled neighborhood and her attendance of the almost exclusively white, private school Williamson Prep. The murder investigation, the biased media representations of police violence, and Khalil's criminalization trigger emotional responses in Starr, including anger and loss, that exacerbate her conflicted sense of belonging and identity. Racialized microaggressions, the devaluation of Starr's home community, and the socio-economic pressures in Garden Heights additionally complicate Starr's standing as a witness to anti-Black police brutality. With uncanny immediacy, Thomas's literary work reflects the perpetual violence against Black individuals and communities in the US, where in 2020, Black people represented 13% of the overall population but constituted a disproportionate 28% of the 1,127 killed by the police (Mapping Police Violence). As Treva B. Lindsey (2015) and Adam Levine (2020) have discussed, *THUG* contributes to counterbalancing the multiplicity of fictional narratives of (young) Black men within the #BlackLivesMatter movement.<sup>3</sup> Thomas writes against the erasure of (young) Black women's experiences and emphasizes what Lindsey calls a "herstorical approach to Black violability"<sup>4</sup> (2015, 234).

Thomas's readers engage with Starr's first-person narrative, whose trauma directs her to reflect upon and (re)negotiate her own experiences within the two conflicting spaces, Garden Heights and Williamson Prep. The fictional inner-city neighborhood and private high school serve as commonplaces that could locate *THUG* throughout the US. The novel, thereby, emphasizes the structural inequalities without neglecting the diversity of Black experiences. Following Rudine Sims Bishop's request for "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" (2015; orig. 1990) for adolescent readers, Thomas makes one young Black woman's life visible. The author attempts to ensure that (young adult) readers see themselves reflected or gain access to experiences unlike their own. Starr's positionality in diverging spaces relates to Nahum Welang's concept of "triple consciousness," which attempts to capture "Black women's identities in contemporary American culture" (2018, 296). *THUG* shows how Starr is affected by questions of identity and racialized microaggressions. Biased evaluations of cultural signifiers, emotions, and the underrepresentation of women of color in mainstream femi-

3 The foregrounding of young Black men's deaths in contemporary US-American culture is mirrored in fiction for young adults. Disproportionate media coverage suggests that Black women are affected by racialized police violence to a lesser extent. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 is a prominent example of how social justice protests (around the world) were incited by a video showing Floyd murdered by Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, MN. Meanwhile, the murders of Black women, among them Breonna Taylor in March 2020, received considerably less attention. Campaigns, such as #SayHerName (initiated by the African American Policy Forum and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies) ardently focus on raising awareness for racialized (police) and gendered violence against Black women, while advocating for legal action and justice (#SayHerName). Convictions in cases of racialized police violence in the United States have been and are still rare, therefore the conviction of Derek Chauvin in April 2021 is a notable exception, while I would cautiously argue that it would be overly optimistic to call this case a paradigm shift in a legal system historically complicit in perpetuating anti-Black violence.

4 Lindsey does not aim to negate "the particular historical and lived experiences of Black men and boys with anti-Black racial violence", but to include "Black women and girls and trans\*, gender queer, gender nonconforming, and queer people as victims and survivors of anti-Black racial terror" (2015, 234).

nism are also minor subjects in Thomas's novel. Overall, *THUG* is part of a larger narrative of police brutality that has become firmly embedded in Young Adult Literature. However, the protagonists in Young Adult works centering around anti-Black (police) violence are predominately young men.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Thomas's *THUG* exists in the context of a few YA novels, for example, Kelka Magoon's *Light It Up* (2019) and Kim Johnson's *This Is My America* (2020), that feature young Black women's points of view – a marginalization that demands critical reflection. In the following, I will argue that through the eyes of a young Black woman protagonist, *THUG* evades Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "the danger of a single story"<sup>6</sup> and employs Sandra Hughes-Hassell's counter-storytelling to raise awareness against the fallacies of ethnocentrism. I will further suggest the concept of quadruple consciousness to comprehend Starr's life as a Black, US American, and young adult woman. Starr's point of view enables Thomas to create visibility for lived experiences and marginalized emotions while providing the potential for reader identification and, at the same time, a space for critically discussing white privilege. Ultimately, all these elements invite readers to reflect on whiteness<sup>7</sup> and question its perception as *the* hegemonically constructed center of US American society.

### Living While Black

In 2019, Baratunde Thurston's TED Talk chronicled the various incidents of a white person calling the police on a Black person for occupying certain spaces or for engaging in a specific activity. These were public spaces, such as coffee shops and parks, while the list of activities included selling water, using the neighborhood pool, and campaigning. Thurston asserts that white people were, in fact, not objecting to these activities but to the presence of Black people in what they conceived of as white spaces. Such incidents have since gone viral under #Living-WhileBlack. Thurston states that Black people's "existence is being interpreted as a crime," that "white people can too easily call on deadly force to secure their comfort," and that "Black people carry the burden of other people's fears" while being forced to "self-police and quiet" themselves. Meanwhile, Taja-Nia Y.

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5 Examples include Kekla Magoon's *How It Went Down* (2014), *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kelly (2015), Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* (2017), *Tyler Johnson Was Here* by Jay Coles (2018), and Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Ghost Boys* (2018).

6 This article applies Adichie's concept of "the danger of a single story" to show the potential of Starr's point of view in *THUG* as I argue that young adult, Black, US American women are often excluded from narratives of anti-Black (police) violence. At the same time, I view Adichie's contested comments about transgender women in recent years as problematic to her own concept, as the author's potential transphobic stance limits whose stories are represented – something that Adichie originally attempts to critique.

7 The author of this article acknowledges that there are caveats to a(n) (literary) analysis of whiteness as Ahmed (2007), Garner (2007), and Martínez (2019) among others have pointed out. This analysis concurs with Martínez' argument that "literature has become a powerful means to criticize the reproduction and maintenance of systems of inequality [...] based on whiteness as a norm" (473) and thus conceives of *THUG* accordingly.

Henderson and Jamila Jefferson Jones argue that “callers in #LivingWhileBlack incidents have consistently leveraged property concepts of entitlement and belonging to advocate for the physical ouster of Black people from shared spaces” (2020, 872). Starr and Khalil’s unwarranted traffic stop in *THUG* also reflects the innumerable contradictions of being Black in a proprietorial world oriented towards whiteness. Thus, Thurston, Henderson, Jones, and Thomas’s *THUG* demand awareness for racism as a system of advantage and possession. The novel powerfully illustrates the underlying (spatial) structures inherent in “systemic abuses of power” (Thurston 2019).

Starr lives in two conflicting spaces that make classist, racialized, and economic inequities apparent: Her family’s home is Garden Heights, where she played with her best friends, Natasha and Khalil, as a young child. However, it is also “the ghetto” (*THUG*, 139) unraveled by warring gangs and job scarcity that coerces primarily young Black men into dealing drugs to sustain their families. At the age of 10, Starr sees Natasha killed in a drive-by shooting, and at 16, she witnesses Khalil’s murder at the hands of a white police officer. Meanwhile, Williamson Prep. is a private “white-people school” (*THUG*, 10), with Starr among the only Black students. The school’s substantial funding provides an adequate education for Starr and her brothers, Seven and Sekani; however, in attending Williamson, they face their Garden Heights community’s accusations of “being all that” (*THUG*, 8) and ‘acting white’ resulting in marginalization and fewer friendships. At Williamson, Starr is hyperaware of her Blackness because pervasive whiteness forms the ‘invisible’ baseline of an ethnocentric worldview and determines her status at school. In addition, her peers’ incomprehension at her dating white Chris exposes various racial biases. Meanwhile, positive stereotyping makes Black Starr “cool by default” (*THUG*, 15), leading her to conclude: “It’s dope to be black until it’s hard to be black” (*THUG*, 15).

Starr’s efforts to present a slightly edited version of self, depending on the spaces she occupies, illustrates the challenges of a predominately white school environment and may serve as a mirror of US American society at large. Considering the intraracial and interracial biases at work in Starr’s life, I suggest reverting to W.E.B. Du Bois’ seminal concept of “double consciousness”<sup>8</sup> referring to the “two-ness” (1903, 17) of being Black and US American. Toni Morrison additionally asserts that US societal formation is inextricably linked to “the presence of the racial other” (1992, 46). She argues that race is used to signify that “American means white” (1992, 47) and, therefore, Black people “struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen” (1992, 47). Starr’s womanhood also requires a critical examination of Black women’s identities, for which Nahum Welang proposes a “triple consciousness theory” (2018, 296). The theory addresses the systematic marginalization of

8 Scholars have closely (re)examined the concept of double consciousness to determine its adaptability and limitations (i.a. Dennis and Dennis). Here, the idea of precluded reconcilability between being Black and being US American, serves to demonstrate one of the divides which the protagonist, Starr, perceives in her life.

Black women's lives and experiences. According to Welang, Americanness builds on "the hegemony of white patriarchy" (2018, 298), while Blackness is "a racial space that prioritizes the interests of Black men" (2018, 298), and womanhood is a "hierarchical gendered identity" (2018, 299) that centers white women. Welang's findings coincide with Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 judicial assessment that Black women face intersecting discrimination (e.g., race and gender).

While Welang proposes that Black US American women have to negotiate the three categories of marginalization above, I suggest that an analysis of *THUG*'s young protagonist necessitates the consideration of age or young adulthood as a fourth marginalizing force. The Black 16-year-old's word is, for example, measured and ultimately disregarded against that of the white police officer, Brian Cruise. Starr's race, gender, age, and class ultimately unfairly devalue her testimony in front of the grand jury. Thomas herself argues that while adults "do the talking" (Thomas 2018) on issues such as race, systemic and structural racism, as well as racialized violence, children and young adults are uniquely affected. The novel's title is telling, stemming from the rapper Tupac Shakur and his coining 'THUG LIFE,' whereby 'thug' is synonymous with 'underdog' and a person who succeeds despite hardships (Reid 2018). Shakur's 'Thug Life' may thereby be seen as a model for young adults in crafting a life in a discriminatory, predominantly white society, which disparagingly equates 'thug' with 'criminal' and instrumentalizes it to prosecute young Black persons. The rapper explained that the acronym stands for 'The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody' (Reid 2018). In Thomas's novel, Khalil explains that "what society gives us as youth, [...] bites them in the ass when we wild out" (*THUG*, 21), echoing Shakur's explanation "what you feed us as seeds, grows and blows up in your faces" (Reid 2018). Shakur's warning is a central theme throughout *THUG* and confronts readers with the consequences of an upbringing corrupted by the effects of systemic racism and hegemonic oppression.

Thomas's novel conscientiously places Starr, Khalil, and other Black young adults at the center of what, considering Shakur's 'THUG LIFE,' can be interpreted as a perpetual cycle of racialized violence. The text counterbalances the dominant adult discourse that often suppresses young voices based on considerations of age, maturity, capability, and a protective instinct to shield children and young adults from the harsher realities of life. However, such shielding requires a degree of privilege that often excludes Garden Heights children's parents and caretakers. *THUG* illustrates how evasion and silence will not protect young Starr but how knowledge and awareness form the only shield available to the Carter family. Starr's father, Maverick, protects his daughter by initiating her into what it means to be a Black person in the US at the age of 12:

The [...] talk was about what to do if a cop stopped me.  
Momma [...] told Daddy I was too young for that. He argued that I wasn't too young to get arrested or shot.  
'Starr-Starr, you do whatever they tell you to do,' he said. 'Keep your hands visible. Don't make any sudden moves. Only speak when they speak to you.' (*THUG*, 24)

Starr learns to not “fear the police, just to be smart around them” (*THUG*, 27). However, it is significant that the knowledge of conduct ultimately does not safeguard Starr from the traumatizing, violent, and racialized experiences in her young life. The fictional experience simultaneously exposes readers to the realities of racism and recognizes lived experiences in a discriminatory system, within which Khalil and Starr’s only ‘offense’ becomes driving while Black. While sociology conceives Blackness and whiteness as social constructs, Thomas carefully illustrates that these categories have real consequences for individuals and communities as they become living cultural signifiers inscribed with one-dimensional definitions, discriminatory stereotypes, and disparaging social standings. Cognizant of her marginalized status, Starr strictly separates her home and school life, proclaiming that “Williamson is one world and Garden Heights is another” (*THUG*, 39). The division censors Starr’s personality and aspects of Black life in Garden Heights. The young woman perceives this censoring process as a necessary aspect to establishing a relatively safe space for herself at Williamson:

I just have to be normal Starr at normal Williamson [...]. That means flipping the switch in my brain [...]. Williamson Starr doesn’t use slang – if a rapper would say it, she doesn’t say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her ‘the hood.’ Williamson Starr holds her tongue [...] so nobody will think she’s the ‘angry black girl.’ Williamson Starr is approachable [,] [...] nonconfrontational [and] [...] doesn’t give anyone a reason to call her ghetto. I can’t stand myself for doing it, but I do it anyway. (*THUG*, 73-74)

Here ‘being normal’ (can) only mean(s) to defer to predominant scripts and registers of whiteness while also anticipating and refuting white ethnocentric stereotypes held against Black women, making the toll of linguistic and cultural code-switching apparent. Starr’s code-switching caters to the comfort of a white majority group by adjusting register, parlance, and behavior, with which she intends to minimize her role as a “space invader” (Puwar 2004), i.e., space historically not reserved for Black people. Morrison identifies language as a device employed to Other, yet certain Black idioms are appropriated as “hip, sophisticated, ultra-urbane” (1992, 52). The discrepancies of how Starr articulates and presents herself are on display during the police investigation after Khalil’s murder: “‘Hello.’ My voice is changing already. It always happens around “other” people, [...] I don’t talk like me or sound like me. I choose every word carefully and make sure I pronounce them well. I can never, ever let anyone think I’m ghetto” (*THUG*, 97). Starr is acutely aware of the stereotypes associated with Black racial identity and African American Vernacular English. She aims to preempt these negative associations in front of the police and eventually the grand jury by continually reminding herself to use “proper English” (*THUG*, 99) to counteract the white presumption of being a “hood rat” (*THUG*, 277).

By explicitly employing code-switching as a survival strategy, Thomas highlights how whiteness is perceived as “natural” default setting while the majority society penalizes “deviating” skin colors, languages, and behaviors. The Trayvon

Martin trial in 2013 helps illustrate how Rachel Jeantel, a young Black woman serving as a witness, became a real-life example of racial stereotyping. Her testimony was overshadowed by the media coverage of her weight, skin color, intelligence, and grammar usage (Cobb 2013). Similarly, Starr has to labor to prove her capability and intelligence at school and during the legal proceedings following Khalil's murder. She also has to combat reductive categorizations, such as 'the angry Black girl' or Sapphire stereotype, by self-policing her emotions. Following Audre Lorde, who states that her "response to racism is anger" (1984, 124) and that the "object of anger is change" (1984, 129), Starr gradually generates her anger into action and resistance. Nevertheless, Jeantel's public reception and Starr's fictional representation of it illustrate that Black women's credibility depends on perception, which, in turn, depends on how well they cater to the demands and modes of conduct forcefully imposed by white mainstream society. This kind of racial control functions to insulate white people from "racial stress" (Di Angelo 2018, 1), while it "set[s] standards [...] by which they are bound to succeed and others are bound to fail" (Dyer 2016, 12). In other words, subliminally functioning whiteness conditions 'living while Black' in US American society, but in *THUG* this simultaneously creates a space for resistance.

### Confronting Whiteness

Starr's experiences, therefore, necessitate an examination of whiteness and white racial identity. Colonialism, slavery, and continued racial discrimination have contributed to establishing whiteness as the invisible norm in US American society. However, Richard Dyer wants whiteness understood as a distinct race and not the predominant "human condition" (2016, 10-12) in which people of color become Other. Beverly Daniel Tatum defines whiteness as a "system of advantage" (2020) that, according to Robin DiAngelo, constructs a "system of inequality" (2018, 76) and operates as a covert yet powerful force. These advantages – also called white privileges – create a sense of "white immunity" (Tatum 2020) and uphold a constructed system of power that positions whiteness and a white worldview as the 'default standard.' Sarah Ahmed concurs with Dyer and Ruth Frankenberg by describing "whiteness [as] invisible and unmarked, [and positioned] as the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants, or points of deviation [...]" (2007, 157). Consequently, diverging perspectives and ethnicities are subject to Othering. Steve Garner argues that whiteness is nevertheless "a kind of presence" (2007, 42) that establishes discriminatory power relations. Othering practices, which allow for the construction of whiteness as *the* hegemonic center of Western societies, also determine who is entitled to tell their stories and have them heard. María Teresa Garzón Martínez amends that whiteness relates to "other devices of domination, such as class, gender, heterosexuality," and that it "inhabits the symbolic world, language and culture [...] [and] the literary imagination" (2019, 477). Ahmed, alongside Frantz Fanon, Linda Martin Alcoff, David Macey, and Lewis R. Gordon, understands race as "'invented' by the sciences as *if*



*it were a property of bodies, or of groups” and consequently, identifies “whiteness [as] an effect of racialization” (2007, 150, original emphasis). Thomas’s Starr becomes the mouthpiece of her individual story and challenges the preconceived entitlements to storytelling. Her story also makes whiteness and its effects visible, which, according to Ahmed, is complicated by racialized spatiality:*

Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it [...]. Spaces are oriented ‘around’ whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen. We do not face whiteness; it ‘trails behind’ bodies, as what is assumed to be given. The effect [...] makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space. (2007, 157)

Contrary to Starr’s mostly white classmates, she sees whiteness and has to navigate the implication of institutionalized whiteness at Williamson Prep. This status of ‘living outside or around whiteness’ means that Starr has to consistently combat racialized emotional stress. Eventually, advocating for Khalil exposes Starr’s Garden Heights life to public scrutiny, affecting her identity and school friendships. The protests calling for justice coincide with one-sided media coverage – Khalil is called a ‘thug,’ ‘gangbanger,’ and drug dealer – which is an extension of racial profiling that casts people of color, often young Black men, from impoverished communities as unlawful. This criminalization is a tool to justify the intensified surveillance and profiling of such communities and their members in a policy effort to establish law and order. Starr attempts to hide her witness status and emotional distress from the Williamson community, but her closest friends, Hailey and Maya, and her boyfriend, Chris, begin to notice changes in Starr. In turn, she applies a more critical lens to her peers’ attitudes toward her, Khalil’s case, and perceptions of race.

Awareness of race and racism shapes Starr’s identity development from a very young age. However, Khalil’s death triggers the protagonist’s more profound understanding, fostered in scholarship by Critical Race Theory (CRT), of how racism and whiteness pervade laws and institutional structures, such as Williamson Prep. According to Charlotte E. Jacobs, educational institutions “act as socializing agents for youth in that they often communicate, replicate, and reproduce the norms of dominant society” (2016, 225). Starr begins to apply what bell hooks calls “a critical gaze [...] that is oppositional” (1992, 116) to her closest peer relationships at Williamson Prep. Her identities – her personal identity (PI) as well as her reference group identity (RGI) as discussed by William Cross (1991) and Beverly J. Vandiver (2002), develop due to her traumatic experience and her active resistance throughout the novel. Starr also recontextualizes the multiple disparities between her friends and herself, connecting them to intersecting forms of marginalization, such as race, class, and gender: “I suddenly remember how different I am from most of the kids here [...]. They went to Taipei, the Bahamas, Harry Potter World. I stayed in the hood and saw a cop kill my friend” (*THUG*, 79). Starr also begins to resist everyday microaggressions, often ‘veiled’ as humor.

Starr and Hailey’s friendship becomes particularly strained and illustrates how white mainstream feminist stances often neglect(ed) to consider incidents

of racialized violence and intersecting oppressions by assuming to represent all women. For example, Hailey decries her female classmates' "play like a girl" (*THUG*, 109) attitude. However, she disregards race and racism, as demonstrated by her unfollowing Starr's Tumblr due to graphic photos of Emmett Till and "all the 'black stuff'" (*THUG*, 247). Starr's reflection of Hailey's behavior mirrors how white mainstream feminisms, despite interventions by scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks<sup>9</sup>, and Mikki Kendall, complicated and still complicate Black women's positions by not fully recognizing various intersecting forces of inequality. Hailey's whiteness 'allows' her to simply disregard questions of race and her racial biases truly become visible during the public debate over Khalil's murder. She makes a 'fried chicken' joke', guilt-trips Starr for calling her racist, argues that Blue Lives Matter and that the officer who shot Khalil "did everyone a favor. One less drug dealer [...]" (*THUG*, 337). Hailey's aversive racism, defined by Gaertner et al. as "the conflict between the denial of personal prejudice and the underlying unconscious negative feelings and beliefs" (2005, 378), is subtle, yet pervasive and no less destructive than more blatant forms of racism. Audre Lorde's observations help to further contextualize how Hailey's whiteness functions in her confrontations with Starr. Lorde writes that if white women specifically "ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define women in terms of their own experience alone, then women of color become 'other,' the outsider whose experience and tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend" (1984, 117). Starr eventually ends the friendship, and Hailey never confronts or apologizes for her racist comments and behavior.

Meanwhile, Starr's increased resistance to racist dynamics reaffirms her "minority alliance" (*THUG*, 248) friendship with Chinese American Maya. It begins a reevaluation of her own racial prejudices due to Maya recalling how Hailey joked about her family eating cat for Thanksgiving. Starr then reflects on the normalization of racism through microaggressions that people of color are confronted with, saying, "it becomes okay for them and normal for us" (*THUG*, 248). Biased media portrayals and the grand jury's decision not to indict Brian Cruise triggers Starr's eventual outspokenness and activism for *Just Us for Justice*—the fictional #BlackLivesMatter movement. It also illustrates the reorientation of her PI and RGO and her realization that silence will not protect her (Lorde, 2017). Therefore, I argue that Starr's activism for social change with *Just Us for Justice*, further discussed by Vincent Haddad (2018) and Adam Levin (2020), is exemplary of Lorde's proposal to utilize anger to increase the visibility of systemic racism and challenge whiteness as *the* supposed societal center.

Thomas's portrayal of Starr's initially secret relationship with her white boyfriend, Chris, is another example of how the novel dismantles the myth of white universalism. The adolescent interracial relationship reveals different opinions

9 In *Significant Contemporary American Feminists: A Biographical Sourcebook*, Lara E. Dieckmann explains that bell hooks (born Gloria Jean Watkins) is a pen name that the author chose in honor of her mother and great-grandmother and that the use of lower case is attributed to hooks' wish to centralize her work rather than her name (1999, 125-31).

and prejudices held by several characters, including Starr's father, Maverick. Her traumatic experience makes Starr realize that Chris "really, *really* [...] is white" (*THUG*, 107; original emphasis). Consequently, she questions the relationship with the young white man, who "has [...] hired help that looks like [her]" (*THUG*, 83). When Starr addresses Chris's whiteness openly, he struggles to understand but also begins to question his race and advantage. Eventually, Starr, Chris, Seven, and their friend DeVante discuss racial stereotypes and cultural aspects of Black communities. When Chris asks about Black names referring to them as "not normal" (*THUG*, 395), Seven confronts his ethnocentric worldview: "'What makes [...] our names less normal than yours? Who or what defines 'normal' to you? If my pops were here, he'd say you've fallen into the trap of the white standard.' [...] 'It's about perspective,' says Seven." (*THUG*, 396)

While Chris remains a product of his upbringing and socialization in an inherently racist society, he, unlike Hailey, is willing to confront his whiteness and learn about his Black friends' experiences. Thomas carefully illustrates that creating dialogue and white awareness is a slow, challenging, and fraught process that often problematically relies on Black people's individual and collective labor. Arlie Hochschild's terminology of "emotional work" (2012, 7) also applies to conversations about race because a Black person may have to adhere to white dominant affective expressions, such as avoiding displays of anger, to be heard by a white person. Adjusting affective expressions often includes a Black person's involuntary explanatory labor in matters of race and structural racism. Chris's lack of awareness concerning race and Starr, DeVante, and Seven's efforts provide evidence for such forms of labor. His character also demonstrates that the white supremacist system is upheld and benefits from the supposed inability to see whiteness, which precludes critical contemplations and the development of a white racial identity. Chris, nevertheless, joins Starr in protesting the grand jury decision in Garden Heights, realizing, for the first time, that his skin color can be salient and how Starr might feel at Williamson Prep and, by extension, in a majority white society.

Finally, Thomas's novel illustrates that living while Black means living outside and around whiteness in the predominantly white US American society. Young adult novels that attempt to make the underlying discriminatory structures of whiteness as *the* hegemonically constructed center visible are often severely criticized and banned to supposedly protect 'impressionable young minds.' For example, in 2018, *THUG* was listed among the most banned/challenged books for its "'anti-cop'[sentiments] and for profanity, drug use, and sexual references" (ALA 2013). However, the novel was not banned for depicted violence against Black bodies, which supports Sherman Alexie's argument for what I would term the hierarchy of protection.

When some [...] fret about the 'ever-more-appalling' YA books, they aren't trying to protect African-American teens forced to walk through metal detectors [...] into school. Or Mexican-American teens enduring the culturally schizophrenic life of being American citizens and the children of illegal immigrants. Or Native Ame-

rican teens growing up on Third World reservations. Or poor white kids trying to survive the meth-hazed trailer parks [...]. No, they are simply trying to protect their privileged notions of what literature is and should be. They are trying to protect privileged children. Or the seemingly privileged. (Alexie 2011)

Considering race and class, Alexie pinpoints who is entitled or not entitled to societal protection. In *THUG*, the protection of (young) Black characters depends on arbitrary demands of conduct prescribed by white norms. Starr's layers of protection wear thin throughout the novel as acts of violence inform how she lives her life as a young Black woman in Garden Heights and at Williamson Prep. However, Starr manages to use her emotional and physical vulnerability to "talk back" (hooks 1989, 5) to whiteness and tell Khalil's story.

### The Power of Versatile Storytelling

Campaigns such as *We Need More Diverse Books* and scholars, among them Rudine Sims Bishop, Sandra Hughes-Hassel, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, have critiqued the persistent overrepresentation of whiteness. They argue that the corresponding underrepresentation of people of color in books for children and young adults is detrimental because "we cannot overestimate the power of seeing (or not seeing) oneself in literature" (Hughes-Hassell 2013, 214). Hughes-Hassell argues that "counter-stories" – fictional representations of marginalized experiences and viewpoints – benefit members of marginalized groups (2013, 214-215). Enhancing visibility but also questioning "the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado and Stefancic 1995, 144) challenges the perpetuation of a single perspective or world view. In her TED Talk, Adichie similarly warns against "The Danger of a Single Story," arguing that the racialized default position of a majority flattens experiences, perpetuates stereotypes, and ultimately creates a single but incomplete story. Thomas's novel provides an important opportunity for affirmation and reader identification but also for shifting (white) readers' perspectives, whose socializing "notion of being the norm informs how [they] look at the world" (Tatum 2020).

Thomas's approach to versatile storytelling is facilitated by a young adult's point of view and aided by music. In an interview, the author specifies that hip hop played a representational role in her adolescence (Thomas 2019). Hip Hop broadens *THUG*'s storytelling as it becomes an important cultural signifier for Starr and her Garden Heights community. Tupac Shakur's 'THUG LIFE' gives the novel its title, serves as a form of foreshadowing, and becomes the text's central theme. Ultimately, counter-storytelling and Starr's first-person narration elicit a more immediate reading experience that validates less widely disseminated worldviews, challenges the viewpoints of majority groups, and addresses "the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation" (Hughes-Hassell 2013, 215) in the face of prejudice, microaggressions, and outright racism. Evading "the danger of the single [racialized] story," *THUG* confronts what it means to be a wo-

man, a man, a young adult, a child, a police officer while being Black in the US. Thomas's novel uncovers the lesser addressed aspects of police brutality against and shootings of Black people by narrating the experiences of those alive after such incidents. Addressing media portrayals, activist efforts, and public protests as well as the trauma and emotions of Black women, Thomas foregrounds a frequently neglected narrative.

Starr Carter's point of view contextualizes the discourse on systemic racism and the supposed invisibility of whiteness within the framework of young adulthood and Black womanhood. The novel centralizes a young Black woman's experiences in a predominantly white society, represented by Williamson Prep. Angie Thomas's illustration of cultural and linguistic code-switching addresses our social and cognitive mobility. As Seven says, "normal" is too often defined by defaulting to whiteness and a white worldview (*THUG* 396), and shifting perspectives, therefore, raises awareness. The juxtaposition with life in the Black community of Garden Heights makes space, visibility, representation, and the lack thereof salient features in Starr's negotiation of her two worlds. Khalil's death becomes the catalyst for a young adult novel that, on the one hand, provides readers with possibilities for identification and an emotional outlet but at the same time confronts readers with unfamiliar lives and experiences. By doing so, *THUG* confronts the 'neutral' status of whiteness and creates awareness for ethnocentrism, oppression, and white advantage, while also illustrating how worldviews shift depending on whose perspective is foregrounded and whose voice is being heard.

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