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Finding the 'Herstorical' Narrative in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*

Adam Levin

Abstract

In this article I use Angie Thomas's popular young-adult novel *The Hate U Give* as a lens through which to explore how young adult fiction, produced by African American writers, can serve to facilitate social activism and change. In the novel, Thomas's Black teenage protagonist, Starr Carter, undergoes a transformation from victim and witness to activist after she sees her Black male friend murdered by a white police officer. As I will demonstrate, the novel is guided and shaped by the ideologies of the Black Lives Matter Movement as it explores the complexities of Blackness in both post-racial and communal spaces. By drawing on these ideologies and employing the perspective of a Black teenage girl, Thomas engages her Black female readers in a readerly process in which they reflect on how Starr's narrative relates to their own lives. In doing so, I argue, she encourages these readers to explore ways in which their own narratives can be used to instigate social activism and change.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; young adult fiction; Angie Thomas; African American; race

In her article 'Post-Ferguson: A Herstorical Approach to Black Violability' (2015), Treva B. Lindsey addresses the representation of women within the Black Lives Matter Movement. She identifies differences in how narratives of Black[1] women's victimhood and activism are received compared to the narratives of Black men, particularly within the public domain. Lindsey argues that male victims' stories of racial violence continue to define narratives of Black oppression and police violence in the United States. In contrast, as Andrea J. Ritchie observes, women are too often relegated to the side roles of the 'aggrieved mother, girlfriend, partner, sister [or] daughter' (2). This implies that 'Black women's experiences of profiling and often deadly force remain largely invisible in ongoing conversations about the epidemic of racial profiling, police violence, and mass incarceration' (Ritchie 2).

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Furthermore, as Lindsey observes, despite 'a robust field of scholarship that focuses on African American women as activists challenging anti-Black racism, dominant narratives about racial justice movements … often pivot around Black [heterosexual] men's activism' (233). A key purpose of #BlackLivesMatter, which was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, three queer Black women, was to address this issue by making the movement more inclusive than previous Black liberation movements. As Garza observes in a *Feminist Wire* editorial, which Lindsey refers to in her study, the objective of the movement was to centre 'those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements' ('Herstory'), focussing on 'all Black lives along the gender spectrum' ('Herstory'). However, Garza indicates that her, Cullors' and Tometi's work has often been erased by those wanting to appropriate the movement and its ideologies for their own purposes.

These problematic absences extend to the narratives of young Black girls. In an interview for her debut young-adult novel *The Hate U Give* (2017), author Angie Thomas motivates her desire to write the text's narrative from a teenage Black girl's viewpoint by observing that 'we do so much to focus on young black men …. But so often black girls are left out of the narrative …. Young black girls have lost their lives, too …. Young black girls are thrown on the floor at school. They're assaulted just for going to a pool party. They're affected by this stuff, too' (in Evans 'Talking').

Interestingly, in extending her discussion to consider Black girls who bear witness to police brutality, a central concern in the novel, she makes reference to Rachel Jeantel. Nineteen-year-old Jeantel, a high school senior, was the key witness in the trial of George Zimmerman, the shooter of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin. Her testimony was significant to proving Zimmerman's guilt because Martin was on the phone to her, describing his perpetrator's movements, moments before the shooting occurred. However, the testimony was met with scorn both within the courtroom and by the public. This was not due to its content. The merit of Jeantel's testimony was evaluated in relation to her class status, appearance and language. Apart from being poor and overweight, she spoke (what Tyanna Slobe refers to as) African American Vernacular English. As Lisa Bloom observes, 'Jeantel's speech patterns, because they are associated with poor African Americans, were perceived by many, including the people who mattered most, the jurors, as unintelligent, and, worse, evidence that she was not credible' (133). Jeantel's treatment, both within and outside of the courtroom, demonstrates how the victimization of Black Americans not only occurs through physical violence towards them, but also through a history of stereotyping and prejudice that marginalizes their narratives.

What studies of Jeantel's testimony, such as Bloom's, suggest is that if this testimony had been treated with the gravity it deserved, the trial's outcome, which saw Zimmerman being exonerated for his crime, may have been different. Furthermore, the disregard for Jeantel's narrative implied a dismissal of the contributions her voice could have made to highlighting other Black trauma narratives and, thereafter, contributing to Black Lives Matter's project of social change and reformation.

This speaks to Lindsey's argument for the contributions the voices of Black women could make to this project if they were better recognized and respected. Lindsey suggests that if a 'herstorical' approach, which gives a stronger focus to the historical narratives of Black women, were adopted, it would not 'preclude studying and acknowledging the … historical and lived experiences of Black men and boys' (234). Rather, it offers an 'expansive lens' (Lindsey 234) that,

in rendering visible the stories of Black women and girls, as well as those of other marginalized groups, 'opens our collective eyes to multiple dimensions of state-sanctioned anti-Black violence' (Lindsey 235). 'Herstorical' approaches, she deduces, 'encourage particularity and specificity as well as collectivity and shared experiences' (Lindsey 237).

As the success of the work of African American women authors has demonstrated, a significant way in which these 'herstorical' approaches have been recognized has been through the medium of fiction. The striking success of Thomas's aforementioned *The Hate U Give* within the young adult genre, has made it an important contribution to this canon. In the novel, as Vincent Haddad observes, Thomas engages with 'real-life references and allusions to [Black Lives Matter]' (41) as she explores the implications of engaging with the concerns of Black Lives Matter narratives from the perspective of an African American teenage girl. Starr Carter, Thomas's teenage protagonist, navigates between the poor Black neighbourhood of Garden Heights where she lives and Williamson Prep., the predominantly white school she attends. These two worlds collide after Starr witnesses her childhood friend Khalil's shooting following an encounter between them and a white police officer, to whom Starr refers by his badge number, One-Fifteen. As Starr observes, this murder is a result of One-Fifteen's mistaken assumption that Khalil is carrying a weapon which is, in fact, a hairbrush. Through this encounter, Starr begins reflecting on her everyday realities in the spaces she occupies. Furthermore, she begins identifying how, in speaking out about what she has witnessed and its impact on her, she herself can be an agent for communal and, thereafter, societal change.

In her review of *The Hate U Give*, which debuted as a *New York Times* bestseller and inspired a highly successful 2018 film adaptation, Adriana E. Ramirez draws a contrast between this novel and the narratives of dystopian young adult novels, many of which have spearheaded the commercial success of the genre. She identifies that *The Hate U Give* employs similar plot tropes to dystopian young adult novels such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. At the centre of these particular works is a teenage female protagonist who contends with a culture of segregation, poverty and violence created by the authoritative structures of her world. The narrative is driven by her efforts to overthrow these structures through acts of protest and rebellion, leading to the hoped-for formation of a better world. Despite being set in present-day America as opposed to a dystopian world and utilizing no fantastical elements within its narrative, *The Hate U Give*'s plot follows a similar trajectory. As Ramirez observes, in each novel 'a teenager [tries] to understand the limits of adult authority, [transitions] into maturity, and [tries] to negotiate the violence of imposed social order' ('Why Readers Love'). Expanding on this, she refers to her interview with Nick Smart, an English professor from the College of New Rochelle in New York, who states 'YA has been dominated by dystopias in which there have been heroines attempting the overthrow of seemingly undefeatable obstacles' (in 'Why Readers Love'). He adds that in all these novels 'young girls [are] out against the world in various ways' (Smart in 'Why Readers Love'). In *The Hate U Give* 'there's also a girl – who happens to be a black girl – being sent out against the system, against the world, against an entrenched opposition' (Smart in 'Why Readers Love').

As Ramirez indicates, the fact that Starr 'happens to be a black girl' is significant. This is because, in her writing of Starr's character, Thomas demonstrates the qualities of her fellow women writers within the canon of African American young adult fiction who 'challenge the content and the form of the typical western prototype and mold it to fit [Black readers'] own cultural/historical experiences' (Rountree, *Just Us Girls* 2). As Ramirez observes, 'in touching on

the traditional tropes of dystopian young adult fiction, Thomas's novel uses a familiar structure to prepare all readers for the nightmare Starr lives through' ('Why Readers Love'). Yet, she also reshapes these structures in a manner which clearly brings Starr's 'herstorical' viewpoint to the forefront. The narrative itself alludes to this literary reshaping by drawing attention to Starr's own adoration for and connection to Harry Potter, the hero of J.K. Rowling's fantasy-based literary franchise of the same name. At the start of the novel, Starr fondly remembers how, as children, she, Khalil and their friend Natasha, who was murdered during an act of gang violence at age ten, would impersonate characters from the Harry Potter film adaptations. She notes how they would distinguish their identities from those of the predominantly white characters of Rowling's work by referring to themselves as 'The Hood Trio. Tighter than … [t]he inside of Voldemort's nose' (23). Starr also refers to her father Maverick's 'Harry Potter is about gangs' theory' (165), which suggests that Harry Potter's world could be interpreted as an allegorical representation of Black American gangs. As Starr puts it, her father 'claims the Hogwarts houses are really gangs. They have their own colors, their own hideouts, and they are always riding for each other, like gangs' (165). The characters' remoulding of Harry Potter's world to fit the structures of the Garden Heights community creates a scenario where Starr herself steps into Harry Potter's role. Like Harry, Starr is placed in a position where she becomes the 'chosen one,' the communal representative who is responsible for leading a fight against an oppressive being who has brought fear to her community. The difference is that as opposed to fighting Voldemort, the mythical 'dark lord,' Starr's enemy occurs in the form of the systems that instigate and propel racism. Furthermore, instead of using magic, Starr employs her voice as an activist to combat and overpower her enemy.

In reimagining and reconfiguring the tropes of fantasy and dystopian young adult literature through the narrative of a young Black girl's activism, Thomas makes an important case for how works of African American young adult fiction can be read and interpreted as vehicles for activism and social change. Quoting Jacqueline Woodson, another prolific writer within this genre,[2] Wendy Rountree observes that for many African American women authors writing for either adult or young adult readers, a key objective is 'to write toward a greater good, to create [social] change through fiction' (in *Just Us Girls* 1). Developing from this, she observes that African American women writers of young adult fiction, in particular, 'have transformed the Bildungsroman paradigm (the coming-of-age novel or the initiation story),[3] rooted in Western aesthetics and interests, into an effective literary form of discourse where African American girls' issues can be addressed' (Rountree, *Just Us Girls* 1). In doing so, these writers address many African American girls' difficulty in 'fully [identifying] with the characters or their experiences in Euro-American Bildungsroman' by '[producing] their own novels to depict these girls' unique experiences in the United States' (Rountree, *Just Us Girls* 1).

Thomas's understanding of fiction's significance and, subsequently, her own intentions in writing her novel, touch on both Woodson's and Rountree's interpretations of African American young adult fiction's importance and function. In an interview with *Publisher's Weekly*, she speaks of 'writing as a form of activism' and suggests that '[if] nothing else books give us a glimpse into lives that we may have not known about before; they can promote empathy' (in Robbins, 'Q&A with Angie Thomas'). This, she implies, speaks to the possibility of creating '[social] change through fiction' (in Robbins, 'Q&A with Angie Thomas'). This literary 'social change,' she suggests, is instigated by making the political narrative of Black Lives Matter appear personal by framing it through the lens of Starr's own Bildungsroman as she navigates the 'herstorical' 'unique experience' of being a Black teenage girl in America.

In this article, I draw on Thomas's reading of *The Hate U Give* as a novel which makes the 'political seem personal' (in Robbins, 'Q&A with Angie Thomas') by exploring how her shaping of Starr's 'herstory' reflects on the broader 'herstories' of young Black American girls. In doing so, I consider how she encourages her young Black female readers to recognize the significance of their 'herstories' and how these 'herstories,' when voiced through activism, can instigate societal change. I explore these concerns through the development of Starr's Bildungsroman in the novel. In particular, I focus on the conditions which both contribute to and complicate the formation of her voice as an activist. I begin my analysis by considering how Thomas, through Starr, reflects on Black girls' efforts to forfeit their own identities in order to assimilate within what are deemed post-racial spaces, and how the prejudices attached to their race impact on their ability to articulate their narratives, particularly within spaces such as police stations and courtrooms which are meant to provide safe spaces for this articulation to occur. I then observe how Thomas extends her depiction of these struggles by exploring Starr's lived experience of violence, both within her own community and within the context of acts of police violence. Crucially, I analyze how Thomas frames these different facets of marginalization and trauma through Starr's own conflicts in constructing her activist voice as she negotiates between Maverick's teachings, which demonstrate both the significance and limitations of activism within her community, and finding her own, independent activist voice.

In documenting Starr's transition from witness and victim to activist, I demonstrate how Thomas, via this narrative of 'herstorical' activism, illuminates how African American young adult fiction provides a crucial space through which to both engage with Black girls' narratives and contribute to the processes of communal and societal change for which Black Lives Matter advocates.

The Activism of T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E

In a pivotal scene in *The Hate U Give*, Khalil, moments before his shooting occurs, introduces Starr to rapper and activist Tupac Shakur's philosophy from which the novel's title stems. This philosophy is embodied by the acronym T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E. ('The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody') which, as Shakur explains, means, 'What you feed us as seeds grows and blows up in your face' (in Abishop, 'Here's How'). Khalil's explanation of the acronym to Starr clarifies what the 'you' Shakur speaks of implies when he defines it as 'what society give us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out' (21). Both definitions resonate with Thomas's understanding of T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E as a term which alludes to societal breakdowns which occur through violence towards Black lives. The acronym's play on the word 'thug' implies that Shakur's philosophy is gendered. As Calvin John Smiley and David Fakunle observe, 'thug' is most commonly used 'to describe Black males who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America' (351), resulting in their association with criminality and violence. In Shakur's revision of the word, the 'thug' symbolizes the Black male outsider who is discriminated against because of his 'otherness'. Consequently, T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E is his attempt to 'codify practices that could reduce violence in the Black community and restore dignity to humiliated, disrespected and disowned Black men,' leading to the formation of an 'urban social reform movement' (Vought 101). Shakur has acknowledged the influence of his mother, Afeni Shakur, a member of the Black Panther Movement up until his birth, on his philosophies and creative work. Despite this, women and girls are predominantly absent from the T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E philosophy.

It is significant that Starr's 'herstory' frames the novel which not only utilizes T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E in its title, but also uses it as its narrative's guiding philosophy. Starr's name indicates the connection to this philosophy in that, prior to his death, Shakur, who never had children, claimed that if he had had a daughter, he would have named her Starr. Thomas, in effect, positions Starr as the voice of Shakur's unborn female child, one who follows and voices his teachings but also struggles in applying them as she negotiates her 'herstorical' narrative. This dynamic is foregrounded as Starr establishes how Maverick shapes her perceptions and ideologies of Blackness through the lens of his own lived realities as a Black man. His approach to teaching her these perceptions and ideologies is the same as for her brothers, Seven and Sekani, indicating his awareness of the realities of Black women and girls, though he is unable to completely distinguish them from the narrative of male victimhood that he knows.

Through his teachings, Maverick encourages a culture of Black pride and activism in Starr and her brothers by building on T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E's values by framing them within the context of the Black Panthers' Ten-Point Plan which he has taught them to recite from birth. Simultaneously, his experiences with the police in his capacity as an ex-convict, following his work as a drug dealer for the gang-lord King, cause him to instil caution in them, alerting them to the stigmas evoked by their Blackness.

In pursuing these conflicting teachings, Maverick speaks to how the tensions between Black pride and activism and the everyday traumas experienced by the Black community complicate the notion of Black identity. Through reflecting on his own experiences, he suggests that as important as it is for Black people to protest against structures that oppress them, it is equally significant for them to survive within these structures. For Starr, these tensions prove conflicting as she considers how to speak out against Khalil's death. As she observes, her activism, up to this point, has been limited to social media where she has 'tweeted RIP hashtags, reblogged pictures on Tumblr, and signed every petition out there' (38). Yet now, she is 'too afraid to speak' (38) because of the consequences it may have for her. In abiding by Maverick's teachings, she has ensured her survival, but it has come at the expense of forming a voice that can speak out against the atrocities she has witnessed and contribute to meaningful social change. In shaping this voice she must challenge these teachings as she brings her 'herstory' to the surface. Central to Starr's process of articulating her 'herstory' is engaging in an introspective approach as she examines her everyday lived realities. As she proceeds to decode these realities, she begins recognizing the problematic structures of these worlds and the necessity of challenging them. This sets in motion her journey as an activist as she begins to depart from Maverick's teachings and find her own voice.

In framing Starr's Bildungsroman from this vantage point, Thomas builds on the conventions African American women writers employ in structuring the arcs of their young female protagonists' journeys. As Rountree identifies, many of these protagonists embark on journeys which cause them to 'find, acknowledge, and cultivate a cultural identity and become a part of an authentic African-American community' (*Contemporary* 4). This, she suggests, reflects on these writers' shared belief that forming 'a strong cultural identity and close ties to the African-American community enable the girls to resist the negative attitudes and influences which are promoted by the dominant culture' (Rountree, *Contemporary* 4). Young-adult fiction writers such as Woodson, she observes, take this a step further by focusing as much on the evolution of their female protagonists' individuality as they do on the development of their respective cultural identities. As Rountree puts it, in reference to Woodson's novels, these

protagonists 'also cherish their individuality and refuse to be limited by their cultural identity' (*Contemporary* 139). To a similar effect, Starr's journey requires her, on one hand, to cultivate a cultural identity as, in contemplating her everyday realities, she encounters and then endeavours to overcome her anxieties regarding her Blackness. On the other, it too requires her to seek out an individual identity which is not limited by her cultural one through her search for her identity as an activist. The emphasis on Starr's activism adds a further layer of complexity to her Bildungsroman. Here, she must 'resist the negative attitudes and influences' both within post-racial spaces and within her own community by actively and openly interrogating and challenging them on both a social and political level. Thomas wants the novel's Black female readers to identify and empathize with Starr, adhering to what Rountree indicates as 'the goal of most writers of young adult fiction' (*Contemporary* 139). Yet, she also wants these readers, through Starr, to explore how their 'herstorical' narratives can be employed as a mode of activism.

Navigating a Post-racial America

From the outset, Thomas encourages her readers to explore their 'herstorical' narratives as a mode of activism by challenging them, through the text's narrative, to reflect on and question their own treatment within predominantly white spaces. She instigates this through Starr's reflections on the world of Williamson Prep. For Starr, these reflections become integral to her realization of how Black lives are perceived within the 'dominant culture' of white, post-racial America. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explores the notion of a post-racial America through his definition of 'colour-blind racism'. In his study, he observes how, from the 1960s onwards,[4] white Americans chose to engage with issues of race through a post-racial lens that asserts that 'although the ugly face of discrimination is still with us, it is no longer the central factor determining minorities' life chances' (Bonilla-Silva 1). Rather, they view themselves as living in a society in which people's value is defined by 'the content of their character, not the color of their skin' (Bonilla-Silva 1). In adopting this perspective, they demonstrate moral and cultural superiority over Black Americans. It allows them to conceive a scenario in which Black Americans' efforts to draw attention to issues of race and racism are invalid within a society that they believe has progressed beyond these issues. Through their self-imposed 'colour-blindness,' Bonilla-Silva suggests that white American citizens 'believe that if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination) then Americans of all hues could "all get along"' (1).

For Starr, the silencing nature of 'colour-blindness' is evident in her adherence to particular values and conduct that gain her white peers' acceptance. Her status within their world is based on how effectively she distances herself from her Blackness. Whilst her peers can behave and navigate this world as they please, Starr must '[hold] her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she's the "angry black girl"' (73–74) and ensure that she is 'approachable' (74) and 'nonconfrontational' (74) so as not to 'give anyone a reason to call her ghetto' (74). She has to learn to navigate her world through their eyes, establishing unspoken divisions and hierarchies in her relationships with them as she finds her value determined by how they perceive her. As George Yancy observes, 'Black Lives Matter, but only in terms of how white gazes value those Black lives …. Black bodies are devoid of intrinsic value: their value is decided upon in terms of white policing and stereotyping' (xiv). This is most evident in her relationship with her best friend Hailey. As Starr puts it, 'I let [Hailey] have her way a lot …. That's part of being Williamson Starr, I guess' (78). This suggests that Starr possesses 'intrinsic value'

within Hailey's world because in '[letting] her have her way a lot,' she adheres to the rules of Hailey's white gaze that allow her to obtain this value.

Hailey reveals her true feelings towards the 'intrinsic value' of Black lives when she reveals her attitude towards cases of violence against Black bodies. At the start of the text, Starr recalls how Hailey 'unfollowed' her on Tumblr after she posted an image of the mutilated body of African American teenager Emmet Till who, in 1955, was lynched by two white men in Mississippi after he allegedly whistled at a white woman in a grocery store. Neglecting to engage with the image's context, Hailey refers to it as 'an awful picture' (80) and speaks of Till as 'that mutilated kid' (336). When speaking to Starr, she does not use racialized terms in these references so as to not to imply that her objections to the image relate to Till's race. However, when conversing with their Asian-American friend Maya, who herself has experienced Hailey's prejudices, she refers to it flippantly as being part of the 'black stuff' (247) on Starr's Tumblr dashboard. As Maya notes, this dashboard includes posts about the murder of Black Panther members Fred Hampton and Bobby Hutton at the hands of the government and the Ku Klux Klan led 16th Street Baptist Church bombing which resulted in the death of four young Black girls. Hailey's dismissal of Till and these other victims of white violence suggests that she perceives their significance in relation to their race, suggesting a privileging of white lives over Black ones. She emphasizes this through her interpretation of Khalil's murder. As with Till, she does not use racialized terms in interpreting this murder, a further demonstration of her 'colour-blindness'. However, in again neglecting to consider the situation's full context, she indicates where her sympathies lie when she continuously refers to Khalil as 'that drug dealer' (114). In contrast, when a news report documents how there have been threats against the life of One-Fifteen and his family since the shooting, she states that he 'lost everything because he was trying to do his job and protect himself' (244), and that his life 'matters too' (244). Through recognizing how 'colour-blind racism' informs both the shaping of her identity and her interactions with Hailey, Starr begins to realize the extent to which post-racial structures have dominated and oppressed her.

In detailing Starr's realization and recognition of 'colour-blind racism,' Thomas reflects on her own experiences within the post-racial spaces of Belhaven University, a private, predominantly white Christian Arts institution located in Mississippi, near the mainly Black neighbourhood where she grew up. In interviews where she discusses the circumstances that led to *The Hate U Give*'s literary conception, Thomas recalls the responses of her classmates to the high-profile 2009 police shooting of Oscar Grant, which occurred at Fruitvale Station in Oakland, California. In an interview with *Vox* following the release of *The Hate U Give*'s film adaptation, Thomas speaks of Grant, an ex-convict, as being very much like many of the young Black men she grew up with. She states that in her neighbourhood, 'Oscar was one of us … I knew guys just like him who were trying to turn their lives around. In my school, my classmates were like, "Maybe he deserved it. He was an ex-con. Why are people so upset? He should just have done what they told him to do"' (in Grady). In choosing to articulate her anger towards this response through writing fiction, her form of activism, and, subsequently, making her protagonist an activist as the text's narrative develops, Thomas further emphasizes her desire for her readers to transform their identification with and empathy for Starr into activism. The evolution of this activism, however, is rooted not only in speaking out against racial prejudices in social spaces. For Thomas, Starr and the novel's Black female readers, it also emerges from recognizing and then speaking out against how their specific 'herstories' have been silenced, both within post-racial spaces and within their own communities.

Policing and the Stigma of Race

Thomas explores the silencing of Black girls 'herstories' within post-racial spaces through the lens of Starr's interrogation at the police station, following the events of Khalil's murder. The scene in which this interrogation occurs draws significantly on, and acts as a response to, the real world events surrounding Jeantel's cross-examination by Zimmerman's attorney Don West within the courtroom setting.

In Slobe's study of the cross-examination, she observes how, for West, employing a post-racial lens was significant to discrediting Jeantel's testimony. He did so, she suggests, by targeting Martin's and Jeantel's use of language. A key concern was the term 'creepy ass-cracka' which, as Jeantel reported, was used by Martin to describe Zimmerman moments before his murder occurred. Bloom observes that, during a CNN interview following the trial, Jeantel clarified that this was an African American slang term referring to 'a cop or security guard' (138), which 'is not racial in her view' (138). West, who struggled to understand Jeantel's dialect, interpreted 'cracka' as 'cracker', which is 'a derogatory term for a white person with possible etymological roots in American slavery as a reference to the sound of white slave owners' whips' (Smitherman in Slobe 616). This allowed West to suggest that Martin had made the case racially motivated. In contrast, Slobe notes, West, Zimmerman and the structures of the courtroom itself exemplified 'colour-blindness,' absolving them of connections to racism. In neglecting the details of Jeantel's testimony that provided evidence of Zimmerman's racial prejudices, West portrayed Jeantel and Martin as part of a culture 'at ease with the immoral language of race' (Slobe 632); he argued that their community itself was comprised of 'immoral residents' (Slobe 632) and that this naturally made them 'subject to suspicion and surveillance from community watchmen, from Zimmerman' (Slobe 632).

Starr's initial efforts to testify to Khalil's and her own truth are similarly hindered when her interrogators attempt to manipulate her language to emphasize One-Fifteen's 'colour-blindness'. The post-racial lens that frames this interrogation is foregrounded by the response to the shooting of her uncle Carlos, a police officer who lives in the suburbs. Carlos speaks of One-Fifteen, his fellow officer, by using his first name, Brian, and expresses sympathy for him as he refers to him as 'a good guy' (55). He suggests that Khalil's reputation as a drug dealer may have motivated One-Fifteen to react in the way he did. Furthermore, he deflects from the problem of police and racial violence to focus on acts of violence Black people commit towards one another, stating that 'Other races aren't killing us nearly as much as we're killing ourselves' (55).

These sentiments inform Starr's interrogation by the detectives assigned to Khalil's case, Detective Gomez and Detective Wilkes. During this interrogation, Starr finds herself monitoring her conduct in a manner similar to the way she does at Williamson Prep. Within this setting, the act of 'policing' language takes on further significance because of the implications it has for her testimony's legitimacy. Yet, despite her efforts to speak 'proper English' (99), Detective Gomez constantly challenges the words she uses to describe Khalil's murder in order to portray One-Fifteen as the 'colour-blind' victim. For instance, after Starr refers to 'the night [Khalil] was *killed*' (98, my italics), Detective Gomez responds by speaking of it as an '*incident*' (98, my italics). In implying that Starr should use the term 'incident' rather than 'killing,' Gomez resists a clear definition of the crime itself. She reinterprets the narrative as ambiguous, bringing Khalil's victimhood into question. She pursues this interpretation further by pushing Starr to frame Khalil, much like Martin, as the racially motivated aggressor. For instance, she attempts to get her to describe Khalil as being 'irate' (100) during his exchange with One-Fifteen.

When Starr observes that he was 'forced … out the car' (101), she probes the possibility that he was 'hesitant' (101). Her agenda is fully recognized when she asks whether Khalil sold narcotics. This detail, Starr observes, is tangential and irrelevant. Yet, it is significant to portraying Khalil and Starr, like Martin and Jeantel, as being part of a community of 'immoral residents,' legitimizing One-Fifteen's suspicions, as well his 'policing' of them.

In formulating this scene in relation to West's cross-examination of Jeantel and focusing primarily on Starr's perspective as a witness, Thomas engages her Black female readers in a further reflective process in which they consider both how their own 'herstories' have been silenced within post-racial spaces and how this silencing relates to that experienced by other Black girls. Notably, Starr is very much Jeantel's opposite by virtue of her educational background and her adherence to the social and linguistic codes that are meant to make her narrative reliable within structures such as court houses and police stations. A key issue with the reception of Jeantel's testimony was how many members of the Black middle-class chose to respond to it. On social media platforms she was connected to popular culture figures such as Precious, the teenage protagonist of the novel *Push* by Sapphire which was later adapted into the film *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire*. In both the novel and film adaptation, Precious is represented as being overweight, poor, abused and illiterate, the embodiment of the stereotypes associated with Black American women. In suggesting that Jeantel displayed these characteristics, her critics deduced that both she and her testimony should be rendered invisible and irrelevant on the basis, as Danielle Belton puts it, of their fear that 'the white folks are going to think we're all like this' ('The Zimmerman Trial'). Starr, in contrast, embodies the respectable, polished and well-spoken Black girl who is accepted both within Black middle-class circles and, at least at a surface level, in white circles. However, as with the value of her identity, the value of Starr's narrative is ultimately evaluated through the lens of her Blackness and the stereotypes with which it is associated. This silences her in much the same way as Jeantel. In indicating the commonalities between Starr's and Jeantel's 'herstories,' Thomas creates a sense of unity between her Black female readers' experiences, regardless of the differences in their social, economic and educational backgrounds. As she demonstrates as the text's narrative progresses, this unity is crucial to engaging in effective social activism on both a racial and gendered level.

Navigating the Realities of Garden Heights

Thomas builds on her efforts to address the affinity between different Black girls' 'herstorical' experiences by exploring Starr's perceptions of the realities of Black communal spaces. For Starr, these perceptions are shaped significantly by her memory of Natasha's murder, which occurred as a result of a drive-by shooting. As Starr reveals, she also witnessed this murder. Throughout the text, Starr's memory of Natasha's murder mirrors her memory of Khalil's murder. She implies that the attention given to Natasha's death differs from that given to Khalil's death. Khalil's murder results in frequent protests throughout Garden Heights and national media attention. By contrast, Natasha's murder appears to be erased from communal memory and unrecognized in spaces outside of the community, rendering her death insignificant. Starr observes that Natasha's killer was never caught because, as she puts it, 'I guess it didn't matter enough' (216). The reason for this erasure is two-fold. On one hand, it demonstrates the problematic and neglectful perceptions of acts of violence within Black communities. On the other, it signifies how 'herstories' within Black communal spaces are silenced.

In their study of police and media responses to violence within Black communities, Anthony A. Braga and Rod K. Brunson observe that many police members, the media and those living outside Black inner-city communities base their perceptions of violence in Black communities on harmful assumptions. Two of these assumptions are that these acts of violence occur 'randomly and thoughtlessly' (Braga and Brunson 4) and that they 'are driven by black people's tolerance for criminal and immoral behavior' (Braga and Brunson 5). This suggests that they do not 'share the moral standards of mainstream society' (Braga and Brunson 12). Such assumptions neglect the influence of poor social and economic conditions in shaping this culture of criminality. This results in both 'over-policing' and 'under-policing' within Black communities. 'Over-policing' occurs when police officers intervene in cases involving citizens who 'seemingly do not warrant law enforcement action' (Braga and Brunson 14). These interventions occur in locations associated with criminal activities, making all acts that occur within them suspicious. This leads the police to 'likely … approach otherwise mundane situations with greater unease than they might in more tranquil settings' (Klinger in Braga and Brunson 14). The usual police targets in these areas are poor and disadvantaged Black males and the tactics used to exert control over them often utilize force. 'Under-policing' occurs when the police fail to address and commit to solving communal crimes. As David Klinger observes, citizens 'complain of under-policing when officers appear to dismiss certain calls for service or fail to make arrests in poor neighborhoods for offenses that individuals living there unequivocally believe would be severely punished in wealthier communities' (in Braga and Brunson 15).

The tensions between 'over-policing' and 'under-policing' occur frequently within Garden Heights. In one act of 'over-policing,' for instance, Maverick is harassed by two policemen who choose to interpret an argument between him and the elderly Mr. Lewis, the owner of a barber shop situated next to his grocery store, as a violent altercation. Starr observes how the policemen push Maverick to produce his ID and force him to the ground as they search him. The misinterpretation of this exchange is, indeed, premised on the location in which it occurs and Maverick's association with the disadvantaged and allegedly 'violent' Black male archetype. In framing this encounter through this lens, the policemen feel justified in 'over-policing' the situation. In contrast, the crimes of King and his King Lords which present a true threat to the Garden Heights community's safety are 'under-policed' as they are either unaddressed or dealt with neglectfully. When, later in the novel, King sets fire to Maverick's grocery store with Starr and her friends inside, Starr notes how the police and fire-fighters arrive late to deal with the situation because 'that's how it works in Garden Heights' (418). In stating that Natasha's death did not 'matter enough,' Starr implies her murder was 'under-policed' in a similar way. Perhaps Natasha's murderer was never caught because the crime itself was carelessly coupled with other cases of Black communal violence, making it a further example of Black people's 'tolerance for criminal and immoral behavior' that rendered it less significant than the occurrence of crimes of a similar nature in 'wealthier communities'.

Connected to the culture of 'over-policing' and 'under-policing' is the privileging of narratives around the communal violence experienced by Black men and boys over Black women and girls. In her study of African American girls' experiences of urban violence, Jodi Miller observes that the threat of violence towards males is connected to 'gangs and offending' (36) whilst, for females, it is linked to 'predatory male behavior' (36) which leads to rape and/or domestic abuse. The belief amongst Black youths is that young women are insulated from gang violence because 'they [are] less involved in street action and rarely [use] guns … street conflicts over gangs and commodities from the drug trade [tend] to be the purview of young men' (Miller

35). The association with gang activity and the threat of gun violence implies that acts of violence towards Black males are treated with more urgency than those towards Black females. Furthermore, the association between Black female violence and the domestic space renders this violence a private act, not warranting communal intervention. The dismissive treatment of Natasha's murder perhaps suggests that a gendered lens of this nature was used in examining the crime's validity. Her death was a product of gang activity which would make it of immediate significance to the community. However, because she was a female victim of this crime, she was viewed in the same context as a Black female victim of domestic violence. Like this victim, the assault on Natasha's body was considered a private matter and, subsequently, not subject to communal action.

The 'under-policing' of Natasha's murder and the communal treatment of her death as a consequence of her gender have significant ramifications for Starr's 'herstory'. This is indicated during a nightmare she has in which Natasha pulls her towards a hand 'holding a Glock' (141) which shoots them both. Through this nightmare, Starr indicates her own affinity with Natasha's experience of murder and death. The unidentified shooter amalgamates Natasha's shooter with the shooter who could take Starr's life if she reveals Khalil's connection to King. The murder's long-term consequences are signified by the state of Natasha's body in the nightmare. Earlier in the text, Starr describes the body at Natasha's funeral as being mannequin-like, noting that she was wearing make-up and a white dress. In the nightmare this body appears dishevelled as Starr describes how Natasha's 'braids [now] have dirt in them, and her once-fat cheeks are sunken. Blood soaks through her clothes' (141). The body has been abandoned and forgotten owing both to the 'under-policing' of her murder and her gender. This implies that if Starr were murdered by King's gang, she might encounter a similar fate. Her murder too would go unresolved as it would be framed as another demonstration of Black people's 'tolerance for criminal and immoral behavior'. Within her community, the significance of her victimhood would, in itself, be evaluated through her gender, potentially creating a scenario where her death was not handled with the same immediacy as that of a Black male.

Importantly, when Starr finally receives a platform to present her 'herstory,' she does so through engaging with a woman activist, Ms. April Ofrah, who works with Just Us For Justice, a small organization in Garden Heights that 'advocates for police accountability' (129). Ms. Ofrah recognizes the value of Starr's voice in representing Khalil's and, subsequently, her own truth. As she states during her initial effort to convince Starr and her family to utilize her legal representation, 'Starr offers a unique perspective in this, one you don't get a lot with these cases, and I want to make sure her rights are protected and that her voice is heard' (135). She emphasizes this when, after learning that Starr has witnessed both Khalil's and Natasha's murders, she states 'I'll do whatever I can to make sure you're heard, Starr. Because just like Khalil and Natasha mattered, you matter and your voice matters' (216).

However, as Ms. Ofrah implies, she believes that for Starr's 'herstory' to be recognized, she will have to 'police' herself in a manner not unlike her 'policing' of herself within 'colour-blind' spaces. This is motivated by Ms. Ofrah's desire to emphasize Khalil's innocence, but in a suitable way for the 'colour-blind' public's consumption. During a television interview Ms. Ofrah arranges for her, Starr remembers being instructed by her 'not to go into details about Khalil's selling drugs' (283) because 'the public doesn't have to know about that' (283). The exclusion of this detail implies erasing Garden Heights from the narrative entirely. This omission potentially elicits sympathy for Khalil as it removes the danger of assuming his death is a consequence of 'black people's tolerance for criminal and immoral behaviour'. Yet, it endorses this perspective

by implying Black communal life is defined by acts of criminality and violence. It also neglects how the stories of Starr, Khalil and Natasha are embedded within the fabric of Garden Heights and, subsequently, how the communal narrative is integral to the 'herstorical' one.

In depicting the Garden Heights' community's neglect of Natasha's 'herstory' and Ms. Ofrah's reluctance about Starr's speaking of her community's realities, Thomas appeals to her Black female readers to consider how they themselves engage with the narratives of their community and the corresponding significance for activism. She expands upon African American young adult fiction's aim of getting its readers (to return to Rountree's expression) to 'cultivate a cultural identity and become a part of an authentic African-American community' by posing two significant questions. First, she asks to what extent her Black female readers relate to, and speak out about, acts of communal violence towards females, considering how often they are made invisible by communal acts of violence towards males. Second, she asks them to consider how they speak of their communal narratives outside of their communities, particularly in a world where an inbred fear of what white Americans think of them is consistently present. In addressing these questions, she demonstrates how cultivating a strong cultural identity is, in fact, a single facet within the process required to recognize and give voice to the communal narratives of African Americans. Within the framework of activism, it is not enough to embrace a cultural identity and community. This process must involve finding a way to speak of the facets of these narratives which are too often marginalized either through patriarchal influences or by the 'dominant culture' of whiteness. She suggests to her Black female readers that recognizing these communal narratives is as crucial to making Black trauma visible as addressing white violence against Black bodies. The challenge in doing this, as she identifies through Starr, is working out how to articulate these narratives.

The Female Voice of Activism

Thomas begins to address this challenge when, despite Ms. Ofrah's teachings, Starr chooses to make Garden Heights's realities a focal point of her interview, noting that, 'Ms. Ofrah says this interview is the way I fight. When you fight, you put yourself out there, not caring who you hurt or if you'll get hurt' (286). Pursuing this 'fight' implies presenting an unfiltered version of both her narrative and herself. In this version, her Garden Heights self is as present as her Williamson Prep. persona. In ensuring this, Starr begins moulding her activist voice. As she details the circumstances that led to Khalil's selling drugs and their encounter with One-Fifteen, she constructs her defence of him by drawing on 'fight' imagery to frame her responses. For instance, when she reveals that Khalil was selling drugs to protect his mother, she describes this revelation as her way of '[throwing] a punch' (283) at King. Later, when the focus is on One-Fifteen, she speaks of her inability to understand why the media suggest it is acceptable that Khalil 'got killed if he was a drug dealer and a gangbanger'(284) by relating this response to 'a hook [going] straight to the jaw' (284). In using this imagery, she challenges the acts of physical violence and psychological trauma which King and One-Fifteen inflict on Black bodies by using her words as her metaphorical 'fist' which she holds up against them. In doing so, she avenges Khalil's death by addressing the realities of both communal and police violence.

The most striking moment of this 'fight' occurs when Starr confesses that, in the moments following Khalil's murder, One-Fifteen pointed his gun at her and 'kept it on [her] until the other officers arrived' (285), a detail she had previously shared only with Carlos. This emphasizes Starr's affinity with Black female victims of police violence. She highlights this further when

she states that One-Fifteen 'assumed that we were up to no good …. His assumption killed Khalil. It could've killed me' (285). Later, after the interview has concluded with a question about what Starr would say to One-Fifteen if he were there, she states, 'I'd ask him if he wished he shot me too' (286). These words evoke the 'herstories' of victims such as twenty-two-year-old Rekia Boyd who was shot dead during an altercation between her friend, Antonio Cross, and police officer Dante Servin. As with Starr's and Khalil's narrative, the shooting resulted from Servin's alleged belief that Cross was carrying a weapon which was, in fact, a cellular phone. Boyd's brother, Martinez Sutton, attributed the public's lack of attention to her death to her gender: 'It's like when something happens to a woman, from brutality, to death, to domestic violence … it's just passed over. It may be said, "oh, Rekia Boyd was shot," and then they may go to a Bulls game, and say, "oh but the Bulls won." … I guess [with Rekia] … there's nothing there for them to bite on, it's not as juicy as them finding a male shot by the police' (in 'Sayhername'). In initially withholding the details of her own interaction with One-Fifteen, Starr herself privileges Khalil's role within the narrative over her own. This erases her presence in her 'herstory,' mirroring the erasure of Boyd's 'herstory' which Sutton alludes to. In revealing her whole truth, Starr emphasizes the value of her 'herstory' and the 'herstories' of young women such as Boyd. It only becomes (to return to Ms. Ofrah's words) '[her] story too' when she speaks to the realities of her experience of Black female victimhood.

In allowing her Black female readers to bear witness to the evolution of Starr's 'fight' through the way she makes her 'herstory' public, Thomas creates a space for them to reflect on how they themselves could participate in this 'fight'. By doing so, she also provides them with a possible lens and language through which to begin to speak of their 'herstories' and to emphasize their significance within the context of this 'fight'. As the text reaches its climax, she broadens this space further as, through Starr's newfound activist voice, she explores how a personal 'herstory' can be used as a medium to encourage communities to mobilize together to instigate change.

Within the narrative, this transition from personal to communal activism occurs following One-Fifteen's acquittal for Khalil's murder. In response to this, Just Us For Justice organizes a city-wide protest, prompting a final confrontation between members of the community, activists and the police. As Haddad observes, this scene alludes to the Ferguson protests that occurred after police officer Darren Wilson's acquittal for the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Motivated by a desire to win an indictment for Wilson and expose police injustices within their community, the impact of the Ferguson protests was felt country-wide. Integral to the protests' success was the role played by the 'women of Ferguson' (Taylor 165). Citing Amanda Sakuma's article on these women's work, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor observes that their presence was significant in transforming 'a string of protests into a movement, by seamlessly shifting between the roles of peace-keepers, disrupters, organizers and leaders' (in Taylor 165). Consequently, Taylor suggests, their involvement created a 'deliberate intervention to expose police brutality as part of a much larger system of oppression in the lives of all Black working-class and poor people' (166).

In reflecting on the Ferguson protests, Thomas positions Ms. Ofrah and Starr as the representative voices of Black women and girls, the Garden Heights women who lead the communal protest against the police. Starr is prompted to action as she recalls Ms. Ofrah's teachings about the significance of her voice as a source for change. Notably, the terms she uses to refer to her voice in this scene differ from those she used in the television interview. As opposed to referring to it as 'how she fights' and drawing on appropriate imagery to frame this vocal

'fight,' she now refers to it as her 'biggest weapon' (405). The image of the 'weapon' is, of course, primarily associated with One-Fifteen who uses his weapon to silence Starr. This makes the notion of her voice as a 'weapon' particularly important. As with the 'fight' imagery, Starr's use of a vocal 'weapon' against One-Fifteen allows her to counteract the threat of his physical violence by exercising her newfound power and agency over him. She truly renders herself visible, abandoning her fears and Williamson Prep. pretences, as she reveals herself as witness and, in targeting the police, leads communal chants of 'Khalil lived!' (407). As Gabrielle Owen observes in her analysis of the novel, in these moments, 'Starr is allowed to be a fully complex human being with … motivations that do not appeal to standards of white normativity or serve to comfort white readers' (253). Owen's reference to white readers' reception of this scene is significant in relation to Thomas's efforts to encourage her Black female readers' activism. The scene elicits a subversion of the power relations with which Black and white readers are familiar. For white readers, being confronted by an empowered Black protagonist who wields a vocal 'weapon' creates a scenario in which their voices are silenced. This causes them to reflect on their own prejudices and generalizations of Blackness. For Black readers, it allows for a literary experience in which their voices are made audible and recognized.

In emphasizing Starr's visibility and recognition, Thomas frames this scene by equipping her with two 'weapons'. The first is a bullhorn which Starr uses to deliver her message to the crowd. This bullhorn, which she appropriately describes as being 'heavy as a gun' (406), amplifies her voice as she speaks her and Khalil's truth. This amplification prompts the community to form a united front against One-Fifteen, which they express through their chants. The second weapon is a teargas canister which Starr throws back at the police in retaliation after they toss it at her and her fellow protestors. As Haddad observes, this alludes to Robert Cohen's iconic Pulitzer-Prize-winning photograph of Ferguson activist Edward Crawford throwing a teargas canister towards the Ferguson police. The photograph, which became the Ferguson protests' defining image, transformed Crawford into a local hero, a symbol of communal anger at police violence. During a CNN interview, Crawford revealed that he did not aim to throw the canister at the police. He did so because it landed close to him and a group of children who were standing on the sidewalk (Haddad 44).

Thomas's interpretation of this image and its use in the novel may be regarded as problematic. However, within the narrative, it creates a further opportunity to reconsider and revise the masculinist narratives of Black activism by reinterpreting them through a 'herstorical' lens. In doing so, it creates a further subversion in power relations, this time in the context of the narratives of Black activism which Black female readers, Black male readers and, indeed, white readers of the text are most familiar with. In reproducing this image with Starr in Crawford's role, Thomas positions her as the symbol of the movement, allowing her 'herstory' to be treated with the recognition that is predominantly reserved for Black male activists. It is 'herstory' which is immortalized as, following the protests, her photograph with the canister appears in a newspaper under the headline 'The Witness Fights Back' (429). Furthermore, it is her activism which is discussed and debated on news broadcasts.

The centrality of Starr's 'herstory' becomes crucial to the final encounter that occurs between the Garden Heights community, King and his King Lords in the scenes following the canister-throwing incident. This encounter is prompted by Maverick's previously mentioned rescuing of Starr and her friends from the grocery store fire started by King in retaliation for Starr's efforts to expose his criminal activities. As already indicated, the threat to

Starr's life implies a threat to her 'herstory's' articulation. If she dies so does this 'herstory' and she potentially becomes part of a forgotten communal experience, much as Natasha did. However, Starr lives to see her 'herstory's' impact on the community as she notes how they engage with the police upon their arrival on the scene. Whereas previously the police presence silenced the community, now they form a united voice as they expose King and his King Lords' actions. This prompts the police to take an action that protects the community, as opposed to disrupting and antagonizing it.

Haddad suggests that this scene, problematically, offers the police a redemptive arc within the narrative as it provides them with an opportunity to '[recuperate their] legitimacy, as they restore order to the community and save the children from the more volatile dangers of so-called "black-on-black" violence' (46). He also argues that the resolution of King's narrative, which sees him and the King Lords arrested for their actions, fails to imagine 'any alternative forms of accountability … that are not carceral' (47). To read the scene from this perspective is to disregard what it implies for the reshaping of the community's voice and Starr's role in instigating it. It does not suggest that the Garden Heights community's perceptions of the police will change owing to King's arrest. Nor does it endeavour to promote correctional ways of dealing with Black communal violence. Rather, it causes the community to begin questioning the rules they have used to govern their world. As Maverick's approach to activism demonstrates, the issue with the community's efforts to use their own voices as 'weapons' for change is that these efforts are limited by the 'policing' they have been forced to adhere to in interacting with the police and King. Consequently, their activism is cautious or silent, or demonstrated through rioting and looting which are conducted as a frustrated response to these silences. Now, as Starr states, 'the rules no fucking longer apply' (419). In breaking the rules by speaking out as a unified communal voice, they reveal their communal story's truth and demonstrate how this unified voice can help produce the social change they aspire to. This communal action is clearly instigated in response to Starr's 'herstory'. In her efforts to get this 'herstory' heard, Starr herself has broken the rules. In doing so, she encourages and empowers the community to do the same. This ensures that Starr becomes the force that inspires communal rebuilding and change.

In allowing Starr's 'herstory' to challenge and reconfigure both the narratives of Black male activism and her community's silences, Thomas encourages her Black female readers to take up a similar challenge by enforcing the visibility of their 'herstories'. Embarking on this challenge, she suggests, forms the pinnacle of their activism as it opens up a space for both them and their community to realize how recognizing 'herstories' and pursuing 'herstorical' approaches can (to return to Lindsey's words) 'encourage particularity and specificity as well as collectivity and shared experiences'.

It is fitting that Thomas ends the novel with Starr speaking of her 'herstory' in the context of a communal narrative. She says that it 'would be easy to quit if it was just about me, Khalil, that night, and that cop. It's about way more than that though' (437), before she proceeds to list the names of real-life victims of police violence. Starr lists the names of Boyd, Sandra Bland and Aiyana Jones alongside those of Martin, Brown and other male victims. In doing so, she emphasizes the importance of 'herstories' to this communal narrative and advocates for their recognition alongside the stories of male victims. Notably, Natasha's name is absent from this list, which also incorporates the text's fictional characters. This absence perhaps reflects Starr's own anxiety about speaking of Natasha's 'herstory'. When Starr speaks of this 'herstory' it is mainly through private reflections to the reader.

Rarely does she address it in her conversations with other characters and it is absent when she speaks of Khalil's story during the interview and the protest. Perhaps Starr herself has been influenced by the notion that 'herstories' which are primarily connected to acts of Black communal violence should be addressed privately, as opposed to the more capacious spaces afforded to the victims of police violence. She has clearly established a language to address the narratives of victims of police violence. However, perhaps, she still needs to grapple with her fear of and to find ways to speak for Natasha's 'herstory,' as well as those of other victims of Black communal violence. This flaw in Starr's activism suggests that there is still more growth to be achieved and more stigmas to be overcome before she can fully use her voice to 'fight' against both racial and gendered oppression.

In light of this recognition, Owen's reading of the text makes a crucial observation. She states that when 'a white kid makes a mistake, it is likely to be viewed as just that, a mistake. Likewise, white protagonists in young adult literature are allowed to be flawed and to learn from their mistakes because they are not expected to stand in as a representative of their race. When a black protagonist makes a mistake, it runs the risk of being viewed as racist generalizations' (Owen 253). Noting this, she observes that Thomas 'allows Starr a human complexity that includes mistakes and frames them as understandable, important even, for what it means to be human in the world' (Owen 253). As this implies, Starr's approach to activism, like Starr herself, is not perfect. Yet, it does not need to be. Thomas does not intend her Black female readers to perceive Starr as the definitive representation of what Black female activism should be. Rather, she is a vessel through which they can reflect on their own 'herstories' and the nature of their activism. Starr's mistakes form as much a part of these reflections as her triumphs. It is only through engaging with both her strengths and weaknesses that these readers can construct their own activist voices and, indeed, engage with 'what it means to be human in the world'.

In this article, I have analyzed Angie Thomas's young-adult novel *The Hate U Give* to demonstrate how African American young adult literature provides a necessary medium through which to engage with young Black girls' 'herstories,' and, consequently, to encourage them to participate in facilitating both societal and communal change. In exploring how Starr, the novel's protagonist, experiences different facets of trauma and victimhood within post-racial spaces, through her engagement with the police and within her own community, Thomas provides her young Black female readers with a space in which to reflect on and examine the complexities of their own realities. In documenting Starr's transformation into an activist, she takes this a step further by emphasizing to her readers how giving voice to their 'herstories' can inspire communities to make their voices heard. Starr's activist voice, as indicated in the text's conclusion, is not perfect. Her inability to give voice to the realities of Black communal violence through her friend Natasha's 'herstory' suggests that she needs to take greater strides in addressing the complexities of Black victimhood. This, however, is crucial to Thomas's message as she encourages her young Black female readers to engage with both Starr's successes and failures as they embark on making the changes they want to see in the world.

Notes

1 I capitalize 'Black' throughout the article as an indication that I am referring to the notion of Blackness within a political context.

2 Other contemporary writers of African American young adult literature include Jason Reynolds, Nic Stone and Tomi Adeyemi, amongst others. For a detailed study of this genre refer to Johnson's *Telling Tales* (1990) or the more recent *On the Shoulders of Giants*, edited by Bickmore and Clark (2019).

3 Rountree quotes Gunilla Theander Kester's study of the Bildungsroman in the context of African American literature, as she identifies Bildungsroman as a German term that describes a genre of literature where the protagonist's desire 'fuels the hero with activity and aggression and prompts him to venture out into the world to seek his own path in life' (in Rountree, *Just Us Girls* 103). This implies, Rountree observes, that this protagonist 'is often in conflict with society's convictions and believes that society, as represented by other characters and by institutions, is at odds with him as well' (*Just Us Girls* 103). In 'The Contemporary African-American Female Bildungsroman,' Rountree notes that this genre has been particularly successful in the context of the Euro-American literary tradition, citing Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1855) and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1958) as key works.

4 Bonilla-Silva observes that the shift from overt segregation and racism to 'colour-blind' racism 'was attributed to two factors. The first of these was the economic consequences of Black protest activity, the impact of which caused a decline in industrialization. The second was the direct challenging of racial oppression by the Civil Rights Movement and other forms of mass protest by blacks (so-called race riots) that took place in the 1960s and 1970s' (23).

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