"The World Called Him a Thug"

Police Brutality and the Production of the Black Body in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*

Barbara Gföllner

Abstract

Widespread police violence, often targeted at black people, has increasingly entered public debates in recent years. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, various African American young adult novelists have addressed the topic of police brutality and offer counternarratives to the stories about black victims disseminated in the media. This article illustrates how prevalent debates of Black Lives Matter are reflected in contemporary young adult fiction. To this end, the first part elucidates substantial issues that have led to the precarious position of African Americans today and to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Drawing on theoretical concepts such as Judith Butler's notion of "precarious lives" and Frantz Fanon's description of the black experience in a white-dominated world, I will analyze Angie Thomas's novel *The Hate U Give* in view of ongoing debates about racial inequality. As I will show, the novel features striking similarities to real-world incidents of police brutality while simultaneously drawing attention to the manifold ways in which society disregards black lives and continues to subject African Americans to racial injustice.

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Trayvon Martin. Tamir Rice. Sandra Bland. Eric Garner. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. These names are immediately associated with a movement. Unlike earlier African American movements, these are not the names of leaders, but names of victims of police brutality, repeatedly chanted at protests and spread online in order not to be forgotten. While these names have circulated around the world and have sparked widespread outcry, many more people are constantly added to the long list of victims of police violence, yet they largely go unnoticed. Relentless killings of unarmed black people are often justified on the grounds of their allegedly suspicious behavior; they are prejudged a threat because of their blackness. Each killing of an unarmed black person marks a moment of a larger structural problem that is rampant and has consequences on black people’s daily lives.

The killings of Ahmaud Arbery in February 2020, Breonna Taylor in March 2020, and George Floyd and Tony McDade in May 2020 marked a tipping point that led not only to national but global protests. While people have taken to the streets to protest unabated police brutality for years, the scale of support the movement gained was different: nationwide protests went on for months, millions of people gathered worldwide in solidarity with Black Lives Matter (BLM), and the movement attracted broader public attention from various groups of people that a “radical” movement suddenly went “mainstream.”[1] BLM became the voice on topics of racial injustice as issues of structural racism and police brutality entered public and private discourse in the United States and in many other countries around the world as protests flared up. Framed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems, injustices became even more palpable, as the virus disproportionately affects people of color and thus emblematizes systemic racial violence.[2]

While BLM grew to unprecedented prominence following the 2020 protests, the movement has been standing up to racial violence for several years. Black Lives Mat-

ter was founded in 2013, after the name of another unarmed black person killed by a law enforcement officer circulated online: Trayvon Martin. The seventeen-year-old African American was shot by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmermann due to Martin's allegedly suspicious behavior. Zimmerman was eventually acquitted of all charges.[3] When Zimmermann's verdict was announced on July 13, 2013, Alicia Garza's outrage on her Facebook page sparked multiple responses: "I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life. black people, I will NEVER give up on us. NEVER."[4] Patrisse Khan-Cullors's answer marked the beginning of a new movement: "#BlackLivesMatter." In the wake of Zimmermann's acquittal, Garza, Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi actively turned the hashtag into a movement as they helped organize marches and protests and compiled a list of demands to bring attention to the cascading effects of institutional racism on the black community. As they explain on their website, "Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression."[5]

This call for black humanity drives the movement. BLM emphasizes that black lives matter to foreground the many instances in which African Americans are treated as less than human, such as in police shootings, cases within the criminal justice system, and rhetorical dehumanization in the media. However, as is the case in most emancipation movements, the call for equality of a marginalized group often provokes the outrage of a supremacist group that fears for its privileged status. The slogan "Black Lives Matter" has evoked the question of why the movement does not call for the appreciation of all lives. Moreover, one particular instance of retaliation, supported by President Trump, contends that "Blue Lives Matter," in reference to the killings of police officers while on duty.[6] Positing that "All Lives Matter," however, dismisses the fact that black lives are not included in this generalization as long as racial injustice and racial bias prevail. "All Lives Matter" can only be achieved by foregrounding the lives that are currently being neglected. As Garza puts it, "*When Black people get free, everybody gets free*."[7] This idea resonates with Judith Butler's notion of freedom, which is influenced by Hannah Arendt's thinking: "Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or, indeed, among us. . . . No human can be human alone. And no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality."[8] However, there are possibilities to create relations that facilitate a more expansive understanding of what it means to be human.

In this context, literature is a powerful tool that allows marginalized communities to provide alternative perspectives. Counternarratives to dominant dis-

courses oppose the derealization of marginalized people by, for instance, challenging prevalent images of black people as criminals or thugs. Indeed, as the cry for black humanity has become more pronounced, authors have felt an increasing urgency to address the issue of police violence in young adult (YA) literature. Topics surrounding racial injustice have been explored in various genres, from graphic novels such as Tony Medina and John Jennings's *I am Alfonso Jones* (2017) to poetry collections such as *Say Her Name* (2020), which was launched by the African American Police Forum, and novels such as Jay Coles's *Johnson Was Here* (2018).

Significantly, since many individuals who are fatally shot by police officers are black teenagers, this topic is widely covered in literature for young readers. The attendant emphasis on black lives counteracts the traditional underrepresentation of black characters in YA fiction.[9] Although YA novels that explore police brutality are very popular today, this has not always been the case. Even Angie Thomas's novel *The Hate U Give* (*THUG*), a critically acclaimed bestseller that has also been adapted to the big screen, was rejected more than 150 times.[10] *THUG* exemplifies this emerging type of black YA fiction, in which fiction often mirrors reality. Although Thomas's protagonist Starr and her story are products of the author's imagination, the reader is repeatedly reminded of black people's imminent reality, as the novel evokes the names of real victims of police violence and echoes their last words.

Written from the perspective of the sixteen-year-old black girl Starr, *THUG* revolves around Starr's witnessing of a police officer killing her childhood friend Khalil. The novel explores both the public's reaction to the teenager's death and Starr's personal conflict with her role as the sole witness to her friend's shooting. As she is exposed to conflicting reactions from both her prestigious white school in Williamson and her black neighborhood Garden Heights, Starr initially decides to remain an anonymous witness to the crime and observes the dehumanizing discourse surrounding Khalil's killing. In so doing, the novel demonstrates how black individuals who lost their lives at the hands of police officers are often denied their status as victims; instead, they become responsible for their deaths because their blackness is viewed as dangerous.

This article will illustrate how the novel describes the public's perception of the black victim in the aftermath of his death. By drawing on bell hooks, I will trace Starr's transformation from passive witness "defined and interpreted by others" to an empowered subject—for "only as subjects can we speak"[11]—who takes responsibility for shaping Khalil's narrative and thus seeks to provide Khalil the humanity that he has repeatedly been denied. In addition to hooks, I will deploy George Yancy's theory of the white gaze, which examines the experience of black individuals in a white-dominated society, and Judith Butler's thoughts on dehumanization and grievability to challenge prevalent assumptions about black individuals as "thugs." In combination,

these tools and ideas will allow me to highlight the importance of counternarratives and -movements that resist pejorative classifications of individuals and Starr's rite of passage from silenced witness to outspoken agent of a social movement in *THUG*.

Monitoring the Black Body

From the days of slavery to the present, the movements and images of black bodies have been controlled and defined by a racial regime that preserves white supremacy. Modern surveillance practices in the United States, which largely target non-white communities, emanate from the system of slavery and are grounded in backlashes against black people's freedom. While, historically, these practices enforced racial segregation in the Jim Crow laws, black people are still monitored today in the form of mass incarceration, which, according to the legal scholar Michelle Alexander, constitutes a new form of Jim Crow segregation. To explain the systematic over-imprisonment of African Americans, she refers to the criminal justice system as a "racial caste system" in the sense that it "denote[s] a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom." In her description, mass incarceration "refers not only to the criminal justice system but also to the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison."[12] This systemic oppression is key to what Alexander labels "The New Jim Crow," a term which allows her to establish a lineage to the racist laws that defined the lives of black people in the Southern states after the abolition of slavery. She thus emphasizes that discrimination, racism, and institutionalization still shape black realities.

The beginning of the phenomenon referred to as mass incarceration is commonly linked to President Nixon's "law and order" strategy in the 1970s and President Reagan's implementation of the so-called "War on Drugs" in 1982. The new "tough on crime" policies, which allowed police officers to stop and search civilians without a warrant and introduced harsher sentences, dramatically increased prison admissions.[13] While fewer than 200,000 prisoners were held behind bars in 1970, American prisons had more than 2.2 million inmates in 2018—a more than tenfold increase while the U.S. population only grew by about sixty percent.[14] Despite composing a mere thirteen percent of the United States' population, black people represent about 35 percent of the prison population. Regardless of the nature of the crime, African American men are nearly six times more likely to be imprisoned than white men.[15]

The soaring incarceration rates can be linked to the enactment of policies that exert control over bodily movement in public spaces, disproportionately aimed at racialized minorities. "Manner of walking" charges, police shootings, and the stop-and-frisk policy are all disproportionately used against people of color. Between 2004 and 2012, 83 percent of those stopped in New York City were African Americans or His-

panics.[16] Such practices and policies, referred to as "racialization of mobility" by Cotten Seiler,[17] show that racial bias significantly influences the police's assessment of possible threats. From slavery via Jim Crow to today's mass incarceration and police shootings, black and brown movement has always been monitored and confined by a white-dominated society. Disproportional and unwarranted stops and searches of people of color are not only demeaning but also frequently end in an arrest or even death.

However, the numerous deaths of innocent people of color at the hands of police officers have long remained invisible. Due to a lack of official data, accounts of those killings are sparse or incomplete.[18] In an effort to provide more comprehensive data on police brutality, the research collaborative Mapping Police Violence and the project The Counted, launched by *The Guardian* in 2015, chronicle the killings by police based on reports, news outlets, and crowdsourced information.[19] According to The Counted, 1,146 people were killed by police officers in 2015. These findings also shed light on the racial dimension of police violence. Black people, and especially young black men between the ages of 15 and 34, are the group most affected by excessive police force. A study conducted by Rutgers University shows that police killings account for 1.6 percent of all deaths of black men aged 20 to 24.[20]

The Thuggification of Blackness

In response to the high number of black teenagers fatally shot by police officers, writers of YA literature have started to cover topics related to police brutality in their novels. Nic Stone, for example, writes about racial profiling and police violence in *Dear Martin* (2017) and explores flawed practices in the juvenile justice system in her follow-up book *Dear Justyce* (2020), while Kekla Magoon provides an account of an urban neighborhood that witnesses the police killing of a young boy in *How It Went Down* (2014) and the killing of a young girl in the sequel *Light it Up* (2019). These and other examples of African American YA fiction provide counternarratives to stories of black victims, whose humanity has often been denied posthumously through media coverage which highlights their alleged criminality. In this way, authors resist the monitoring of black people's bodies and stories, and instead expose the realities of police brutality to show young readers that their lives do matter, as the writer Jesmyn Ward affirms: "I believe there is power in words, power in asserting our existence, our experience, our lives, through words. That sharing our stories confirms our humanity."[21]

Although *THUG* foregrounds the fatal shooting of Starr's childhood friend Khalil as an example of police brutality, the novel's central conflict occurs in the aftermath of Khalil's death. As the only witness to her friend's death, Starr, the novel's protagonist,

processes both the trauma and grief of Khalil's loss. In addition, she is constantly exposed to the media's and her schoolmates' derogatory comments on his life as a "thug." Indeed, when his name first appears in the news, he is labeled "a Suspected Drug Dealer," but the fact that he was unarmed is omitted. Khalil's name is replaced with negative descriptors such as "threat," "thug," and "drug dealer." News reports about the shooting always include pictures of Starr's black neighborhood, "a neighborhood notorious for gangs and drug dealers," and speculations about Khalil's gang affiliations.[22] Since Starr is confronted with different reactions to Khalil's shooting from her white and black environments, the one labeling him a criminal and the other mourning his death, she initially decides to hide her identity as the sole witness to Khalil's death.

The word "thug," as used by the media, plays a significant role in the posthumous creation of the black victim's narrative. As CalvinJohn Smiley and David Fakunle explain, the media exploit the negative connotations of the word "thug." In media coverage, "thug" refers to male African Americans "who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America."[23] The media's use of "thug" thus cements the image of the criminal black person, as it connotes criminalization and thereby shifts the blame from the perpetrator to the victim. In discourses surrounding BLM demonstrations, both victims and protesters are often referred to as "thugs." For example, in response to protests in Minneapolis, President Donald Trump called the protesters "THUGS" on his personal Twitter account.[24] Trump's rhetoric showcases how hegemonic groups try to control discourses on violence to fit their narrative. Using language in a way that turns groups opposing violence into agents of violence, then, helps to justify the use of excessive force by the state.[25] Tellingly, *THUG* shows how the representation of Khalil as a "thug" shifts attention from the criminal act of the police officer to the victim's alleged criminality; as Starr observes, "the news basically makes it sound like it's Khalil's fault he died."[26]

The fact that the word "thug" is often employed to emphasize a black individual's criminal background highlights the media's power to determine language and shape connotations. As the linguist John McWhorter argues, "thug" conveys different meanings depending on its usage; voiced by white people today, it "is a nominally polite way of using the N-word."[27] In the novel, Starr becomes aware of the power of the media to shape public opinion as she sees a photo of Khalil on the news that shows him "gripping a handful of money." She comes to understand how one picture can generate very different interpretations in people: "For some people, the thug-shot makes him look just like that—a thug. But I see somebody who was happy to finally have some money in his hand, damn where it came from."[28] As a photo ostensibly depicts the objective truth, Khalil is visually branded a thug. He is denied a personal narrative, which allows the media discourse to alter the facts. Knowing his

background, Starr can see beyond the money in his hand as alleged proof of his criminality. The different connotations triggered by one picture reveal the implicit bias that affects people's understanding and quick judgment of black individuals.

The image of black people as thugs can also be connected to the concept of the "white gaze." In *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008), George Yancy explores this idea from various perspectives and defines the white gaze as a hegemonic way of seeing that "function[s] to objectify the Black body as an entity that is to be feared, disciplined, and relegated to those marginalized, imprisoned, and segregated spaces that restrict Black bodies from 'disturbing' the tranquility of white life, white comfort, white embodiment, and white being."[29] In order to illustrate the link between blackness and whiteness, he refers to Frantz Fanon, who asserts that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man."[30] Thus, the meaning of blackness is constructed with reference to whiteness, which constitutes "the transcendental norm," Yancy notes. In this sense, history has shown that the black body has long been regarded as the "diametrical opposite" of the white body by having been framed as "criminality itself." Prior to any gestures they might make, the black person is seen as dangerous. As Yancy explains, the white gaze automatically condemns the black body before it commits a crime: "The reality is that I find myself within a normative space, a historically structured and *structuring* space, through which I am 'seen' and judged guilty a priori." Starr's interrogation by the police offers an example of this indiscriminate characterization of the black body as dangerous and guilty. As the last person who saw Khalil alive, she plays a crucial role in seeking justice for her friend. However, she is also aware that her credibility will be compromised by her black body, "by nature criminal," which is more easily adjudged guilty than the white one, "by nature innocent, pure, and good," to draw on Yancy.[31] The police, instead of talking about Officer Cruise, the perpetrator, inquire whether Khalil "compl[ied]," seemed "irate" or "hesitant," and ask about his affiliation with gangs and drug dealers.[32] They have already identified Khalil as the source of danger before interrogating the witness.

As Judith Butler's analysis of the Rodney King beating illustrates, there are different ways of "seeing." Instead of being recognized as the object of violence, Khalil is made into what Butler calls the "*agency* of violence." This image of the threatening black body is produced within the white imaginary, "through the saturation and schematization of that field with the inverted projections of white paranoia."[33] Within their racist imaginary schema, the police officers fail to grasp the immanent reality of their own brutality and transfer Khalil's vulnerability to themselves by creating a narrative that confirms their image of the black individual as a permanent threat. The questions directed at Starr support their preliminary conclusion, which refuses to see Khalil as the victim. Nevertheless, Starr challenges the interrogator's

questions and tries to reaffirm Khalil's position as the target of violence by stating that "he didn't pull the trigger on himself." She refuses to let the police construe his vulnerability as their own and "make them feel better about killing [her] friend."[34] In so doing, she challenges the power of the white gaze to condition the public to believe in the guilt of the black individual.

Similarly, the report of the encounter that the father of Officer Cruise delivers in an interview on TV also exposes his biased mindset, as it correlates blackness with criminality. He perfects the image of his son as a diligent citizen, as he highlights his love for "working in the neighborhood" and dedication to "mak[ing] a difference in the lives there." At the same time, he reveals his distorted perspective of the incident by talking about Starr and Khalil's cursing and threatening actions, claiming that "they were up to something" and "could've taken him down if they teamed up." Starr is shocked by his inaccurate remarks: "I couldn't have taken anyone down. I was too afraid. He makes us sound like we're superhumans. We're kids."[35] Officer Cruise's father argues within the racist schema that perceives the black body as a threat and thereby "splits the violent intention off from the body who wields it and attributes it to the body who receives it," as Butler puts it.[36] He views Starr and Khalil through a lens that conflates blackness and violence before even considering them as unarmed teenagers.

The public discourse around Khalil construes his image as a criminal by calling him a "thug," which renders his body hypervisible and even more vulnerable. While invisibility endangers black individuals by denying their experience or even existence, hypervisibility subjects them to constant surveillance. The public's white gaze fixes and defines black individuals according to the white imaginary, which led Fanon to conclude that the black person is "overdetermined from the outside."[37] Racist language, as the author Claudia Rankine points out, makes those addressed hypervisible: "Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present."[38]

The discourse surrounding Khalil's death reminds Starr of her own vulnerability and thus prevents her from disclosing her identity as the witness. Starr worries about her two worlds (i.e., Williamson and Garden Heights), which she always carefully keeps separate, possibly colliding and potentially being labeled a thug herself. As bell hooks states, "speaking out is not a simple gesture of freedom in a culture of domination"; instead, speaking against dominant beliefs as someone in a disadvantaged position within a dominant hierarchy that repeatedly denies black humanity means that black people "are often shocked to find [themselves] assaulted, [their] words devalued."[39] The fear of revealing her identity is thus part of Starr's coming to terms with her precarious position, recalling Audre Lorde's argument that "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems

fraught with danger."[40] Self-revelation, then, can implicate hypervisibility. Appalled by the distorted image of Khalil and herself that the police officer and his father propagate, Starr nonetheless makes use of her voice as an anonymous witness in an interview with the press. As she clarifies, the proliferation of negative images of black people through the media led to Khalil's death and provokes false assumptions about their community: "This all happened because he . . . assumed that we were up to no good. Because we're black and because of where we live. We were just two kids, minding our business, you know? His assumption killed Khalil."[41] The officer's internalized assumptions about blackness have caused him to perceive an unarmed black teenager as a threat, which in his eyes justified a brutal murder. Thus, the public's thuggification of blackness, fueled and amplified by people's racist perceptions, confines the black body to a constant state of precariousness.

A Hierarchy of Grief: The Dehumanization of Black Life

Given the easy dismissal of black lives and society's frivolous willingness to accept any justification of their killing by police officers, it seems that not all lives are considered equally valuable or worth to be mourned. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler addresses questions of grief, vulnerability, and bodies as well as violence in the United States' post-9/11 climate. Her "hierarchy of grief," which she uses to investigate whose lives count as "grievable," may also be applied to racial discrimination. She argues that grievability is linked to a dominant socio-cultural frame which classifies people as human and determines which life is valued and accepted to be mourned. This question of who is and is not considered human—and, accordingly, who may be mourned—is shaped by the media. Those who are represented in the media and granted a narrative may be humanized. However, narratives can also be twisted and used to dehumanize individuals. Referring to killed unarmed black people as "thugs" and spreading distorted narratives about their lives in the media, as is the case in the media coverage of Khalil's death, implies that their lives are, in fact, not grievable.[42] The media's narrative of the victim as a criminal suggests that their life is less valuable. Thus, to draw on Butler, Khalil has "fallen outside the 'human' as it has been naturalized in its 'Western' mold by the contemporary workings of humanism."[43]

The juxtaposition of the image of Officer Cruise as a dutiful citizen and Khalil as a drug dealer establishes a hierarchy of grief to the detriment of the dead black individual. To a certain extent, this hierarchy is influenced by common associations with (skin)color, such as correlating whiteness with innocence and blackness with immorality. As such, the dominant socio-cultural frame that classifies specific people as human beings grants white people greater grievability than black people. Since the negative bias attached to his skin color overshadows Khalil's innocence, it also denies his grievability. While Khalil's killing is justified through his portrayal as a thug, the

police officer's actions are rationalized through his portrayal as a victim. Although Starr, as the only witness to the crime, testifies to her friend's innocence, the officer is not arrested for shooting the unarmed young man. Instead, people empathize with him and emphasize his reputation as a benevolent person. Despite having killed an unarmed adolescent, Starr's uncle Carlos, a police officer himself, refers to Officer Cruise as "a good guy" and the media offers space for him to be pitied as his father talks about his son's well-meant intentions in tears: "Brian's a good boy . . .. He only wanted to get home to his family, and people are making him out to be a monster."[44] The refusal to acknowledge the actual perpetrator as a threat shows that his white privilege grants him humanity, sympathy, and even innocence. Khalil's youth and innocence, but most profoundly his humanity, are dismissed by police and public alike. People's inability to comprehend the bias that shapes their interpretation and reconstruction of events is symptomatic of a blind spot in the white imaginary that has determined the black body as inherently threatening.

Khalil's death is rationalized to prove that his life did not count as valuable. The prevalent media narrative reduces his entire existence to one negative aspect that also prompts Starr's friend Hailey to devalue his life with racist remarks: "He was a drug dealer and a gangbanger . . .. Somebody was gonna kill him eventually." As she even considers it "kinda messed up that we're protesting a *drug dealer's* death," she blatantly denies him his grievability.[45] In an interview, Starr calls attention to the absurdity of the discussion surrounding Khalil's death:

> I don't understand how everyone can make it seem like it's okay he got killed if he was a drug dealer and a gangbanger. . . . It seems like they always talk about what he may have said, what he may have done, what he may not have done. I didn't know a dead person could be charged in his own murder, you know?[46]

Starr reminds the public that instead of mourning an innocent person that has been killed, people posthumously put the victim on trial for his own death. Khalil not only has to answer for all the mistakes he has made in his short life but is also blamed for his murderer's mistakes.

Having internalized this hierarchy of grief, Hailey resorts to a response common among white people when discussing the fate of the police officer, who "lost everything because he was trying to do his job and protect himself. His life matters too, you know? . . . What's wrong with saying his life matters too?" Her remark initiates a discussion reminiscent of BLM debates and backlashes such as All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter. Hailey fails to see Khalil's death as a result of racial injustices and deeply ingrained prejudices. As Starr explains: "His [the policeman's] life always matters more!"[47] Due to prevalent assumptions about black individuals as thugs, Hailey demonstrates how people negate the innocent black teenager's right to live and

instead bond with the white police officer over their shared white privilege.

The media does not only choose which lives to glorify and which lives to vilify posthumously, but it also chooses which lives to ignore. These lives thus become unreal to the media and those influenced by the media. As Butler explains, dehumanization can lead to the derealization of lives: "The derealization of the 'Other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral."[48] While the discourse about Khalil as a criminal constructs a pronounced negative image, the derealization of Khalil's life also becomes apparent through aspects of his life that the media discourse consciously omits. Initial media coverage of the incident is brief and does not mention Khalil's name, dismissing his humanity through the obliteration of his name, his image, and his narrative. His life is considered unreal; thus, his death becomes unreal, as well. Similarly, later on, the media tend to use the label "drug dealer" rather than "Khalil." This erasure of his name, which is a specific marker of his uniqueness and humanity, casts Khalil as less-than-human. In this way, the novel highlights that the derealization of a certain group of people makes it easier to justify violence inflicted upon them, as their deaths seemingly leave no marks.[49]

As a means of resistance, Starr gradually resorts to individual strategies that allow her to counteract the injustices done to Khalil without revealing her identity as the witness. She refuses to call Officer Cruise by his name and instead refers to him by his badge number: "One-Fifteen."[50] Since he is responsible for her friend's death and her trauma of witnessing this murder, Starr does not want to grant him more authority. As she is aware of the power imbalance between the law enforcement officer and herself, she tries to assume control by questioning his humanity. Moreover, referring to the police officer by his badge number emphasizes that this instance of police brutality is not merely an individual wrongdoing; instead, it exemplifies the larger structural problem of the criminal justice system that fails to provide sufficient security for racialized minorities.

The fact that Khalil's body remains in the streets for hours after his murder is yet another blatant sign of his dehumanization. His body does not matter enough to be taken care of immediately. As Starr observes, he is treated like an object rather than an innocent dead person: "They leave Khalil's body in the street like it's an exhibit." This points to his invisibility, as well as the derealization of his life, and furthermore evokes Michael Brown's murder, whose body was similarly left in the streets for hours and sparked the riots in Ferguson and then ignited the Black Lives Matter movement. Here, Thomas connects the fictional realm to real life, as she accentuates the appalling reaction to black people's deaths. To make the grim reality of the killing of black people even more palpable, Thomas calls to mind Eric Garner's last words when the narrator describes the moment after Khalil's death: "They finally put a sheet over

Khalil. He can't breathe under it. *I can't breathe*."[51] Treating black bodies as objects that can be left at the scene of their deaths for all to see and stifling their last words illustrates the derealization of black lives within a system that tries to make the black suffering it is built on invisible and inaudible.

Rewriting the Narrative: "Thug Life"

While victims' voices have been suffocated and their bodies criminalized in a system operating through the white gaze, African Americans have created opportunities to counter the dehumanization of black lives. In the novel, Starr uses social media to remind the public of Khalil's humanity, which has been disregarded by media discourses promoting his thuggification. She starts a blog titled *The Khalil I Know*, where she posts pictures of her friend that represent him the way she remembers him. On Tumblr, she adds captions to the pictures to offer a more personal account of Khalil's life, such as: "The Khalil I know was afraid of animals."[52] By providing a counternarrative to Khalil's representation in the news, Starr questions white America's way of seeing blackness; she challenges Khalil's stereotyped image as a thug and portrays him as a human being whose life mattered. Starr unsettles what Butler refers to as "the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field," as her posts reveal "a reality that disrupt[s] the hegemonic field of representation itself."[53] She does not only provide a single story about her friend but rather shows multiple facets of his life and being. By giving him a face, she demonstrates his humanity and grants him the grievability that he had been denied.

Social media allow Starr to speak out for Khalil and challenge existing discourses that have framed her friend's image as a thug. Starr thus expresses her first form of activism online. Similarly, social media was an important tool in igniting the BLM movement as #blacklivesmatter helped to connect people for a common cause. It remains a crucial part of its activism and significantly contributed to the swift expansion of the 2020 protests that gained worldwide solidarity. Social media may be seen as a "space of appearance" as conceptualized by Hannah Arendt; they help political action gain visibility.[54] Social networks, thus, provide a forum to animate conversations surrounding police violence and serve as a testimonial space to spread evidence of the dehumanization faced by black people; evidence that does not always suffice to indict the perpetrator but draws global attention to the rampant police brutality that disproportionately targets people of color.[55] Most importantly, social networks amplify black voices and connect people.

Similarly, social media becomes Starr's first platform to remind people of Khalil's humanity. Instead of directly exposing her own body, she uses her voice in the online space. Starr animates people to like and reblog her postings and to upload more art-

works and pictures of Khalil. Digital platforms thus provide spaces for people to connect, which is a key component for action to move from virtual space to the streets. Starr gradually realizes that she is implicated in Khalil's invisibility and/or hypervisibility if she remains silent: either his true personality is denied and his name remains unvoiced or his criminal actions are foregrounded to overshadow his humanity and his name becomes replaced by "thug." Starr finally sees her responsibility to capitalize on this visibility to create change, as Lorde so powerfully argues: "And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength."[56]

As Starr becomes more conscious of her voice, she also begins to comprehend the power of language. The language exercised by the dominant group labels Khalil a thug and takes control over the individual by positioning him within a certain social context. As Butler notes in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of Performativity* (1997): "We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory." To name someone is to recognize their existence but also a means to take away power and call their subjectivity into question. Language not only "sustain[s] the body" but "can also threaten its existence." Hence, depending on the circumstances, words can have a "wounding power."[57] However, speech that wounds can also be deployed as a means of resistance: "Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance," as hooks has pointed out.[58] In the course of the novel, Starr comes to understand that dominant discourses can be resisted, rewritten, or reinterpreted. As she develops her awareness of these hegemonic discourses, she engages in what hooks refers to as "self-recovery," which means to see oneself "as if for the first time, for our field of vision is no longer shaped and determined solely by the condition of domination."[59]

The meaning of the word thug expresses exactly this struggle "to read [oneself] anew."[60] Accordingly, both Khalil and Maverick, Starr's father, challenge the word "thug" as they refer to Tupac Shakur, who reinterpreted the phrase "thug life." According to the rapper, thug life is an acronym and translates to "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody."[61] Tupac divests the word of its original power and reinvests it with a new meaning, which transcends its intended pejorative use by white people. He reclaims the word commonly employed by a dominant group to derogatorily refer to the black community, removes its negative associations and gives it new meaning that draws attention to racism.

Reclaiming a word also means reclaiming power. As a stigmatized group takes control over the usage of a term that has been used to their detriment, their feeling of agency increases.[62] This process of recovering agency also shapes Starr's transformation from a girl intimidated and silenced by the public's derogatory comments

about her friend Khalil to someone empowered by the very anger she has bottled up while remaining anonymous. The phrase "thug life" and its reappropriated meaning play a significant role in the assertion of black humanity, as does Starr's process of emancipation as she learns "to express anger for [her] growth," as Lorde put it.[63]

While Starr first learns about Tupac's understanding of thug life in a car ride with Khalil shortly before his death, the concept functions as an important motif throughout the novel. Starr also discusses thug life with her father, which is when she comes to understand its deeper meaning: "It's about what society feeds us as youth and how it comes back and bites them later." She realizes that Tupac's message is not just directed at adolescents but at "everybody at the bottom in society" and symbolizes the struggles of black people in the United States. As Starr's father explains, it reflects the situation of many drug dealers in Garden Heights. To prove his point, Maverick alludes to existing racial injustices in America. He talks about unequal education opportunities, as schools in black neighborhoods "don't get the resources to equip you like Williamson does," and unequal career opportunities, as "corporate America don't bring jobs to our communities." Finally, he addresses the issue of drugs dispersed in black neighborhoods and points out that before judging a community or individual for their drug problems, one has to understand the wider web of implications: "How did the drugs even get in our neighborhood? This is a multibillion-dollar industry we talkin' about, baby. That shit is flown into our communities, but I don't know anybody with a private jet." Thus, thug life stands for the cycle of poverty and crime in which many black individuals find themselves as a result of an oppressive system: "That's the hate they're giving us, baby, a system designed against us. That's Thug Life."[64]

The novel dismantles negative stereotypes about black people as inherently criminal by portraying drugs, gangs, and violence as consequences of a systemic lack of opportunities. Khalil was trapped in a cycle of poverty and crime, while Starr, who has benefitted from better circumstances, at first does not comprehend her friend's "choice" to resort to an illegal way of earning money: "I swear to God whenever I think about Khalil falling into that life, it's like watching him die all over again. Yeah, Khalil matters and not the stuff he did, but I can't lie and say it doesn't bother me or it's not disappointing. He knew better." She fails to grasp that criminality is often not a matter of choice, as her friend DeVante points out: "He didn't wanna sell drugs, Starr . . .. Nobody really wanna do that shit. Khalil ain't have much of a choice though." Only when DeVante explains the reasons for her friend's decision to sell drugs, Starr begins to understand. Khalil sold drugs to support his terminally ill grandmother and pay his drug-addicted mother's debts. Khalil refused to be a member of a gang, but the media nevertheless turned him into a "gangbanger." Thus, Starr partly succumbed to the one-sided assumptions about Khalil that were propagated after his death: "This

is worse than denying him. I thought the worst of him." She comes to understand that Khalil's image is controlled by derogatory names that position him as a criminal: "I just hate how he's being called a thug and shit when people don't know the whole story." Hence, Starr concludes that the cyclical nature of poverty and crime traps people and leaves them without a choice: "Neither one of them thought they had much of a choice. If I were them, I'm not sure I'd make a much better one. Guess that makes me a thug too."[65]

Tupac's art plays a crucial part in Starr's transformation from silent witness to advocate for social justice. It furthers her understanding of Khalil's background. In addition, it inspires her pride in her community and encourages her to speak up for her friend. His reappropriation of thug life not only raises awareness of social injustices but also serves as a form of empowerment. It attempts to instill hope in people and motivates them to question and challenge racial biases that determine their lives. As the protagonist realizes, in the context of the ongoing protests and riots, thug life means that "the system's still giving the hate."[66] Khalil's death at the hands of police brutality is no exception and riots will not stop as long as the victims do not get justice. An insightful conversation with her father helps her find her voice:

> "That's why people are speaking out, huh? Because it won't change if we don't say something."
> "Exactly. We can't be silent."
> "So I can't be silent."[67]

Starr sees the wider implications of Khalil's death for society as a whole and comes to understand the power of her voice: "This is bigger than me and Khalil though. This is about Us, with a capital U; everybody who looks like us, feels like us, and is experiencing this pain with us despite not knowing me or Khalil. My silence isn't helping Us."[68] Grasping Tupac's meaning of thug life intensifies Starr's sense of community as she prioritizes her contribution to the black community over her fear of speaking out by capitalizing Us. Moreover, it helps her to connect with the people in Garden Heights. She not only overcomes her fear of speaking out but also the shame she internalized about her black neighborhood. As Starr reveals her identity as the witness and publicly stands up for her black community as the voice of protests fighting against police brutality, she, together with other protesters, affirms "the right to place and belonging."[69] These protests expand the space of appearance from online platforms to the heavily policed streets and thus now directly target the problem at its roots. These performative and collective actions provide an opportunity for those who have been excluded, considered "unreal," or silenced, to speak themselves into existence. In the words of bell hooks: "When we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere who lives in silence."[70]

Starr's motivation to raise awareness of the systemic oppression that affects her community is essentially what spurred the BLM movement. Garden Heights is the epitome of what Patrisse Khan-Cullors has described as "a forgotten generation" that has been "written off": "We've been written off by the drug war. We've been written off by the war on gangs. We've been written off by mass incarceration and criminalization."[71] Protesting and speaking out for her is a way to bring this generation into existence and heighten people's awareness of its circumstances. For Starr, her voice represents a way to grant Khalil humanity through the narratives she provides. Khalil represents more than just a victim of police brutality; his case is an example that illustrates society's contempt for communities such as Garden Heights and the unjust treatment of their residents through the police and media. The novel challenges the normative discourse that decides who is considered human and instead foregrounds the lives of unjustly killed black people. At the end, the book leaves the fictional realm as it provides the names of real victims of police brutality:

> 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. It's about Seven. Sekani. Kenya. DeVante. It's about Oscar.
> Aiyana.
> Trayvon.
> Rekia.
> Michael.
> Eric.
> Tamir.
> John.
> Ezell.
> Sandra.
> Freddie.
> Alton.
> Philando.
> It's even about that little boy in 1955 who nobody recognized at first—Emmett.... They're not forgetting. I think that's the most important part.[72]

This transgression from fiction to reality reminds the reader of the prevailing racial discrimination in today's society and suggests that Khalil's story is representative of countless forgotten lives. As Starr notes that "there will always be someone ready to fight," the novel's message transcends the diegetic level to inspire and empower its (black) readership. Starr speaks up for black humanity by giving her friend a narrative and by insisting on saying out loud his name: "I called him Khalil. The world called him a thug."[73] In that sense, *THUG* embraces black humanity and tries to ensure that black lives and names are not forgotten.

Notes

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45 Thomas, *THUG*, 341, 183.

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48 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 146–48.

49 See Judith Butler, "What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter'?" interview by George Yancy, *The New York Times*, January 12, 2015, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/; Butler, *Precarious Life*, 146, 35.

50 Thomas, *THUG*, 71.

51 Thomas, *THUG*, 25, 26; emphasis added. See Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 14, 169. In July 2014, Eric Garner was choked to death by the police officer Daniel Pantaleo while exclaiming "I can't breathe" eleven times. Sadly, this cry for help has been repeated by other victims of police brutality and gained renewed urgency in 2020 when George Floyd uttered the same words as he was choked to death by a police officer kneeling on his neck for more than eight minutes. The ensuing protests counteracted this systematic silencing of

black voices as George Floyd's dying words "I can't breathe" became the rallying cry of worldwide BLM movements.

52 Thomas, *THUG*, 205.

53 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 150.

54 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198. Considering that the very plight—police brutality—that BLM aims to address mostly occurs in public spaces, which are also surveilled by the police, it is not surprising that the BLM movement gained global attention through, and continues to operate in, virtual spaces. This foregrounds the importance of social media as safe platforms for vocalizing resistance.

55 Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 75, 170. Videos, often captured by smartphones, which show law enforcement officers beating or shooting people of color have now widely spread through social media. While such footage serves as uncontestable evidence of police violence and clearly shows who is the perpetrator, visual proof did not always suffice to hold police officers accountable in front of the law, as in the case of Freddy Gray and Eric Garner. See Sarah Almukhtar et al., "Black Lives Upended by Policing: The Raw Videos Sparking Outrage," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/19/us/police-videos-race.html. The *New York Times* compiled video footage depicting police violence targeted at black people. George Floyd's killing stands as one of the most recent examples of police brutality filmed and posted online, which turned people around the world into witnesses. The uncontrolled spread of videos of people dying at the hands of police officers, however, also raises important ethical questions: Does it really serve a demand for justice or do these widely shared videos turn black death into a spectacle? For more information on this topic, see Allissa V. Richardson, "The Problem with Police-Shooting Videos," *The Atlantic*, August 30, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/08/the-problem-with-police-shooting-videos-jacob-blake/.

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66 Thomas, *THUG*, 171.

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70 hooks, *Talking Back*, 18.
71 Khan-Cullors and Bandele, *BLM Memoir*, 248.
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