

“Starr was a witness.”

Remarks by Shawn Anthony Christian, Ph. D.

Reading Across Rhode Island Kick-off for Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*

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In my brief remarks, I want to share my thoughts on a few themes that resonated for me as I read Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*, which I think is a profound novel for this year's Reading Across Rhode Island selection.

Before I turn to some of the novel's themes, I have to speak about two of its other elements. The first element is the experience of reading this 400 plus pages novel. It has been a while since I have read a novel of that length. I typically read reports, newspapers, and whatever comes up on my phone. So I was very thankful for the opportunity, as I read it, to sit and handle this long book; to write in its margins as I took notes to prepare me for today; and, to be surprised at how lite weight it is, especially when I held it in one hand, with my pointer finger inserted in between its pages to mark my place as I laughed out loud or simply looked off in the distance after a reading a particularly moving passage. These and other moments were very much part of the physical experience of reading this novel. They comforted me as I became engrossed in Starr's story, the worlds that she navigates, and the trauma that she and others endure. Because it likely means that we are trying to focus on one thing amid the distractions of life, even enjoying the attempt, I just like the idea of people not only reading novels but reading 400 plus pages novels. That image of all of us (and soon others) reading *The Hate U Give* is powerful.

The other element is the fact that Starr is a young, black female narrator. Though recent young adult fiction and coming of narratives are increasingly populated with diverse voices, I

was still struck by how infrequent narrators such as Starr appear in literature. The rarity compelled me to back to some of the more memorable in my reading experiences, specifically, Claudia in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Lauren in Octavia Butler's *Parable of Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, or Claireece in Sapphire's *Push*, which is the powerful pre-text to the film *Precious*. I mention these works and their young, black female narrators less for comparison and more to underscore how the voices that they symbolize have so much to say. These novels and their narrators urge us to listen.

For example, about mid-way into *The Hate U Give*, Starr states, "I tense as footage of my neighborhood, my home, is shown. It's like they picked the worst parts-the drug addicts roaming the streets, the broken-down Cedar Grove projects, gangbangers flashing signs, bodies on the sidewalks with sheets over them," and then asks, "What about Mrs. Rooks and her cakes? Or Mr. Lewis and his haircuts? Mr. Reuben? The clinic? My family? Me?" (245). For me, *The Hate U Give* chronicles the particular trauma that Garden Heights experiences to complicate and nuance notions of community, especially communities of color. As Thomas demonstrates, Garden Heights is inter-generational, besieged with drugs and crime, generative, and, as several of its residents affirm, worth fighting for. It is a site of contradictions and, therefore, is home to a range of human experiences. Though difficult for her, Starr comes to learn this and more, especially that Garden Heights is richly complex in its history. It is a history that is part of her personal, family history.

*The Hate U Give*, then, intertwines the history of a place, of a community within the lives and histories of the Carter family. For example, we learn about familial conflicts, incarceration, and entrepreneurship within this family but also among Garden Heights' other residents. Into those histories, Thomas deftly weaves elements of the history of the Black Panthers, black

popular culture in the 1990s, and much of what is our own, recent experience with police involved shootings and other forms of gun violence. Her invocation of Tupac Shakur is particularly instructive. From the novel's title through to how Kahlil identifies with THUG LIFE, in *The Hate U Give* history is living. History is NOW!

Angie Thomas does not simply intertwine however. She powerfully juxtaposes as well. Familiar binaries populate the novel: black-white; rich-poor; old-young. But they do so in proximity. Part of why the almost four months of the novel's time passes so quickly and why its action remains so recent is because of how localized Starr's movements are. Everything is relatively close, from her school and her Uncle's home in the suburbs, to Natasha's untimely death. In unfolding the story this way, Thomas not only reminds us about the closeness of our pasts to our present but also of the minimal distance between spaces of comfort and dis-ease. That closeness fuels the contradictions that we all live, Starr especially.

Among the many traits that make Starr the protagonist of *The Hate U Give* is her struggle to navigate such contradictions. Starr wrestles with the in-between. It is not comfortable for her, and, over the course of the novel, being in-between weighs heavily on her mind. As she states, "I still don't know if I'm betraying who I am by dating Chris, but I missed him so much it hurts. Momma thinks coming to Uncle Carlos' house is normal, but Chris the kind of normal I really want. The normal where I don't have to choose which Starr to be. The normal where nobody tells you how sorry they are or talks about 'Khalil the drug dealer.' Just normal" (162-3). Starr lives a form of double-consciousness that includes a great deal of code-switching and inner turmoil. It often paralyzes her voice.

If Starr has one flaw, then, by her own admission, it is her inability to voice, especially on behalf of others. During the altercation between Kahlil and One-Fifteen, Starr tells us, "I fight to

find my voice” (22). Not doing so haunts her throughout the novel and, eventually, propels her to more confidently affirm, “What’s the point of having a voice if you’re gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn’t be?” (252). What develops after IT happens in the novel forces Starr to speak up and out. Not just about Khalil but also about what she truly feels and to those with whom she cares the most: Hailey, Chris, and her Dad. I’ll say more about this in a moment, but it is important to note that Starr is far from voiceless. Recognizing this then, we can read *The Hate U Give* as a powerful look into what it means for this young, black girl to mature into her voice and affirm the identities that shape it.

“The only call me the ‘the witness.’ Sometimes the sixteen-year-old black female witness” (14). Starr’s reaction here to news coverage of Kahlil’s death encapsulates the power in the story that is Starr’s experience and in the story that is *The Hate U Give*. Surely, the novel is about much more: our contemporary moment, Starr’s relationships with friends, especially the young black men in her life, gang violence, and drug addiction, to name a few. But in this statement, which is similar to several that she utters over the course of the novel, Starr names the tension that drives her inner turmoil. Starr was a witness. Although known but rarely discussed with her friends and family, being a witness to two shooting deaths formed so much of her identity. Witnessing Natasha’s death at young age traumatized Starr. Largely unhealed that witnessing did not prepare her for the intimacy, the heat, the speed, and the prolonged, in her face fear from witnessing Khalil’s death. Then again, healed or not, how could it prepare her? So, through Starr, Thomas compels us to not only consider what it means for Starr—this young black girl—to voice but to voice after witnessing the horrific, senseless deaths of her closest friends. For me, it is also reminder that such witnessing is too commonplace, too routine, and that many witnesses struggle as Starr does and worse.

So where does *The Hate U Give* leave us, its readers? I hope contemplative, even energized. To the degree that you are, just as I read Starr and Thomas doing in and through the novel, I also ask you to reflect on your reactions to the novel in terms of the role that it creates for you. Indeed, Starr is not the novel's only witness. As you read, you, too, witness, for example, the juxtaposition of the power and hopelessness of Khalil's death alongside Starr's often funny internal monologues. At times, it is a heavy role, which you can absorb on many levels. Just as it does for Starr, I hope that the witnessing that *The Hate U Give* asks of you compels you to never forget, to never give up, and to never be quiet.

Thank you!