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Perfecting Blackness: An Analysis of Respectability and Security in Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*

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Abstract

Respectability Politics are a set of codes that were created by many late 19th and early 20th century black thinkers and philosophers such as W.E.B. DuBois and Nannie Helen Burroughs. This idea garnered support from prominent members of the black community in the hopes of proving black humanity to a racist majority American culture. Author Angie Thomas critiques Respectability Politics and police brutality in her 2017 young adult novel *The Hate U Give*. Though Starr Carter, the novel's protagonist, experiences police brutality firsthand, the novel is about how she navigates between her school Williamson Prep and her home neighborhood of Garden Heights. The central conflict is she finds herself altering her behavior in each space. This leads to her experiencing an identity crisis, causing her to question the power of Respectability Politics to keep her safe. Starr Carter performs Respectability Politics, which damages her ability to be herself in both black and white spaces, makes evident the illusion of the Other's security.

Keywords: Respectability Politics, Racism, African American, Angie Thomas, DuBois, Safety, Black, African American Literature, Black Communities

Angie Thomas' novel *The Hate U Give* (2018) can be considered a social justice text that seeks to bring awareness to the lived experiences of black people. The text actively explores the

harsh realities of police brutality and the brutal and relentless disposal of black bodies; however, the text also accentuates the realities of black life and assimilation and acceptance in dominant American culture. Many scholars who have critiqued or reviewed this novel typically focus on the plot that is at the forefront. The focus is on Khalil, his death, and how the community joins together to protest his unjust murder. However, my argument centers around the presence of Respectability Politics and how they are still evident in black communities and in Angie Thomas' novel *The Hate U Give* and how they can be a detriment to the survival of black persons. Respectability Politics, although not named, is heavily focused in Thomas' novel. Starr Carter represents the belief that if black Americans act like "they want to be treated" then they will gain acceptance in dominant culture. In Angie Thomas', *The Hate U Give*, Starr Carter's performance of Respectability Politics, which damages her ability to exist in both Black and white spaces, makes evident the illusion of the Other's security.

Respectability Politics is the cultural erasure of black Americans to ensure the acceptance into dominant American culture. Respectability Politics are a set of codes that a marginalized group of people use to police themselves in an attempt to self-correct and juxtapose themselves against the dominant culture. This practice is coded as "virtues of self-care and self-correction to lift the black poor out of their condition by preparing them for the market economy" and to help black Americans gain safety and acceptance in American culture (Harris 33). It is used to combat the system of racism as it exists in American culture. Dr. Allissa V. Richardson states that "the politics of Respectability was deeply entrenched in assimilationist thought, which reinforced many of the Black stereotypes that it sought to annihilate." This method sought to control the behavior of black people and appease the white gaze (196). This practice leads to the erasure and rejection of the original culture as well as suppression of intersectional individuality within the

black community. Respectability creates an all or nothing dynamic for black people. "... respectability politics weaponizes racial kinship; it espouses the notion that individual Black achievement advances the race, while individual failures hinder the race" (Rasaki 34).

Respectability causes minorities to assimilate to imagined norms and abandon the cultural uniqueness, in order to become what is "acceptable" in dominant culture. However, this acceptance is never granted because of the systemic racial tensions that are present in America.

Respectability has thrived because of the belief that the dominant culture needs proof that black people can be respectable, and acceptance will be granted once Respectability is established. This idea leads black Americans to perform in an acceptable way in order to gain acceptance by getting rid of traits that are considered "less American" which accentuates the thoughts and ideas of what the post enslavement African American should be according to the works and practices of late 19th century and early 20th century thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois and Nannie Helen Burroughs. Both thinkers had access to opportunities that the common black person of their time did not. Through their personal elitism, they were able to offer unattainable societal expectations.

W.E.B. DuBois wrote at the beginning of the century post-Reconstruction and many Blacks felt the need to humanize themselves. DuBois is known for the concept of the "talented-tenth" discussed in his 1903 essay "The Talented Tenth", in which he argued that only one tenth of black people should be educated and that it was their job to uplift the remainder of the race. He believed that uplifting the race meant teaching black people how to speak "correctly", wear "presentable" clothing, and behave in a manner that was worthy of respect. His idea was taken up by the elite blacks and used as a method of race-correcting. DuBois believed that in order for black Americans to evolve that it was "the problem of developing the best of this race that they

may guide the Mass away from the contamination and Death of the Worst...” (33). This idea placed the circumstances of black people on themselves rather than the conditions they were forced to endure. However, his elitism was illustrated when he states, “not too many college-bred men, but enough to leaven the lump, to inspire the masses, to raise the Talented Tenth to leadership...” (63). He wished to mold the “exceptional negro” and have him lead the “Negro race” into a place of acceptance in American culture. His concept of double consciousness is essential in my analysis of Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give*. The internal conflict of being both black and American. The protagonist Starr Carter not only performs Respectability, but it conflicts with her ability to navigate her school life and her home life and it does not secure her from the discriminations and abuses of being a black person.

Nannie Helen Burroughs started an all-women’s school educate black girls and provide them opportunities to succeed in a racist society. She hoped to establish black womanhood as human and worthy of protection and respect. In 1909, Burroughs opened National Training School for Women and Girls. Burroughs sought to combat the elitism of her time through an all-girls school that “promote the full development of ‘true womanhood’” (Taylor 394). She wanted black girls/women to have access to equal opportunities despite their shades and creeds. She used her personal experiences with colorism to create a space that focused solely on the black girls and their development in order to succeed in society (Taylor 392). However, she still believed that the black race needed to be “lifted up.” She, too, believed that black people must be responsible for their success in America. She limited the number of girls who could attend the school and did not offer scholarships in order for them to learn to be self-reliant. Burroughs wanted the “best of the race” to attend her school and held standards of morality for both her students and teachers. She would not admit girls who were considered “deviant” or unruly

(Taylor 396-7). Her practices establish the idea of “exceptionalism” and “tokenism” in the black community. Burroughs believed that if black girls were trained properly, they would be able to be self-sufficient and prepared for society. Through her school, she trained the “exceptional” black women who “contrasted” the American cultural stereotypes of black womanhood. Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* illustrates the detriments and illusion of exceptionalism through the main character, Starr Carter.

The idea of “race-correction” began to influence generations of black Americans and used as a way to shape the expectations of the behavior of black American. “Even though Respectability evolved as an elite ideology, it operates as common sense in most quarters of black America” (Harris 34). The black elites used these methods in an attempt to gain acceptance in dominant culture. They believed that black success was contingent upon the approval and acceptance of a racist majority American culture. The practices of Respectability Politics are ineffective against the real dangers of racism. They illustrate that the abuse that the oppressed suffer is the result of their own actions rather than the systems that are in place to deter black people from advancing. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term “politics of Respectability,” in 1993 which “emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations” (187). Respectability Politics ignore the problems of racism and contribute to the stereotypes have been placed on black people by a racist majority American culture. This is illustrated in Thomas’ novel when Starr interacts with her friends throughout the text.

Starr Carter is the protagonist of the novel and she is faced with an internal conflict. Who is she and how should she behave? She explains her behavior in her home community and her school in the beginning of the text. Williamson Prep is her predominantly white school that her

parents sent her to for “better opportunities.” While there, she develops a persona whom she calls Williamson Starr. At Williamson, she performs Respectability Politics in the way she speaks, behaves, and interacts with her classmates. In her speech, she uses Standard American English to avoid being seen as “hood”. With her behavior, she ignores microaggressions and subtle racist comments in fear of being seen as the angry black girl. Her interactions with her classmates are always polite. “Williamson Starr does not give anyone any reasons to call her ‘ghetto’” (Thomas 71). Starr states this as she explains her behavior at Williamson. Her behavior is motivated by fear and the idea that she will only be accepted if she behaves “correctly.” This actively reflects the tradition of black Americans to “correct” their behavior and speech in order to be seen as worthy of acceptance of social equality in dominant American culture. This is representable of the idea of the “exceptional negro.” Traci O’Neal defines the “exceptional negro” as “often well-educated, always articulate, cultured, and able to move seemingly effortlessly in white business, political, and social circles” (Ch. 1). Starr’s behavior at Williamson sets her apart from “other” black people who seek to gain acceptance in dominant American culture by assimilating to the dominant culture. When Starr is in her home community of Garden Heights, she still is out of place because her community sees her as a culture traitor so she must behave in a contrast to her Williamson persona in order to fit in at home. People in her community feel as though Starr is no longer apart of the community because she attends a predominantly white school (Thomas 4). She unconsciously removed herself from the people in her hometown which caused their feelings toward her. Starr feels compelled to keep her Williamson person and her Garden Heights persona at completely opposite ends of the spectrum and she feels safe when she is performing Respectability, but is she really safe?

Although Starr actively performs Respectability Politics, it does not protect her from the dangers that are associated with her being black. While leaving a party one night, Starr and her friend are pulled over by a police officer. Both of them are treated like criminals while doing nothing wrong. As a child, Starr's father warned her about an inevitable interaction with the police. He told her to follow their directions and keep her hands visible. Starr remembers the police talk from her father and keeps her hands visible; she answers his questions as they are asked (Thomas 21). This "talk" is representative of the realities of being a black American. This moment emphasizes the idealistic reality of black Americans and their ability to "control" how their oppressors view them. The automatic criminalization of black bodies is heavily recognized in this text. Starr's interaction with the police in the moment causes her to undergo a major identity crisis and realize her place as a black American. In this moment, it does not matter that she attends a predominantly white private school, or that she has never committed any type of infraction. In this moment, Williamson Starr does not matter. This moment illustrates how the trope of the "exceptional negro" does not matter because of her blackness. She is automatically considered a criminal because of her positionality as a black girl. This is symbolic of the racial history and tension that is dominant American culture. Because she is a black girl, Starr is unable to experience forms of innocence because it is taken from her at a young age. She not only witnesses the death of her friend, but she is also held at gunpoint. This interaction causes her to question her behavior as well as who she supposed to be. This moment illustrates the height of DuBois' theory of double consciousness. Although Starr felt the tension before her interaction with the police, this moment stressed her positionality. "I blink through the tears. Officer One-Fifteen yells at me, pointing the same gun killed my friend with. I put my hands up" (Thomas 24). She realized that her ability to ignore the conditions of her neighborhood was detrimental

not only to her survival, but the survival of all the black people she knew and loved. This event illustrates the true dangers of racism and the illusion of exceptionalism. Even still, after this interaction, Starr feels forced to continue to split herself between two places.

As Starr navigates both Williamson Prep and Garden Heights after the murder of her friend and her interaction with racial profiling, she feels an intensifying discomfort in both environments. In both spaces, she is unable to completely be herself for fear of her security. At Williamson, Starr's fear is social. She continues to avoid behaving in a way that will make others label her as the stereotypical black girl. She does not wish to succumb to the same behavior that her friends at Williamson Prep looked down on and believed her not to possess (Thomas 71). When she is in Garden Heights, her fear is physical. She avoids any interaction with policemen. The fundamental root of the lack of belonging she feels comes from her ongoing identity crisis in the text. Starr understands that she is not fully Williamson, nor is she fully Garden Heights, but when she is in either space, she behaves at either extreme. She cannot interact with her school friends in the same way because she begins to experience resentment of their ability to not concern themselves with the problems of minorities. Their white privilege destroys her relationships with them. Starr begins to realize that because of their social realities they did not have to fear for lives as she did. When Starr is with her white boyfriend, Chris, she cannot see past his privilege. She states, "A cop as white as Chris points a gun at me" (Thomas 83). She begins to notice the subtle racist comments of one of her friends, Hailey. Hailey's interaction with Starr illustrates Starr "exceptionalism" because Hailey tells Starr that she is different from the people in her home community. Starr does not fit into any of the traditional stereotypes that are associated with blackness, so Hailey does not feel threatened by her blackness. And thus, Starr is tokenized. Starr's exceptionalism allows her to evade the "stereotypical criminal, thug,

welfare queen, baby mama, baby daddy, and myriad of other labels usually associated with black folks” (O’Neal ch. 1). The tension between Starr and Hailey grows throughout the text and is representative of the idea that a marginalized group has to behave in a specific way in order to be perceived as worthy of humanity by the dominant/oppressive culture. Starr begins to realize that assimilating to the practices of dominant culture does not protect against the real danger of racism in fact it feeds into the manipulation of “acceptability.” The tension between Hailey and Starr also illustrates the passive aggressiveness of racism because Hailey believed that she was unable to be racist because of her friendships with minorities, however, her whiteness provides her with privilege which gives her power which has been proven historically to work against minority people of color. In Chapter 20, Maya and Starr confront Hailey about her microaggressions. Hailey even says “I’m not apologizing because it was only a joke...It doesn’t make me racist” in response to a racist comment she made about Maya eating animals for Thanksgiving. Hailey is also unable to empathize with Starr’s grief of Khalil because he was just “a drug dealer and gangbanger” and “somebody was gonna kill him anyway” (Thomas 340-341). Hailey sees Starr as an exception to what and who black people are, so she feels comfortable expressing her disdain for black people and their struggles. This moment illustrates how Starr cannot run from racist stereotypes because she is from the same place as Khalil. This puts Starr in an even more internal conflict. This illustrates Starr’s realization that no matter how she acts or assimilates, she will never be able to separate her blackness from her American experience. She tries to continue to perform Respectability, but she becomes frustrated and her Respectability turns into rage-management.

In the novel, the elitism that is associated with Respectability Politics is also evident. Starr’s parents feel if they remove themselves from their black neighborhood, then they will be

safe from the dangers of Garden Heights, but their problems will not cease with an area code change. In the early 20th century, many of the black elite sought to control what was considered uncouth and unruly in hopes of being seen as better to the dominant culture. However, the dangers of being black followed black people even when they move from what Starr Carter knows as “hoods” and “ghettos.” The migration of black Americans happened for many reasons. The main reason was an escape from the harsh realities of racism. This parallels Starr’s parents’ decision to move from Garden Heights to a place that was perceived to be “safer”. This paradox is reflective of Starr’s internal conflict; she has to worry about the safety of her neighborhood friends as she moves out of Garden Heights.

Lisa Carter, Starr’s mother, quotes the nurse that helped deliver Starr; Starr was born not breathing and Lisa blamed herself. ““Sometimes you can do everything right and things will still go wrong. The key is to never stop doing right”” (Thomas 154). This quote symbolizes how “checking the boxes” does not prevent situations from going wrong. This is parallel to the ways black people navigate life with the belief that behaving in proximity to Western cultural practices will protect them from racism when in reality it does not. This moment helps Starr find herself and redefine how she navigates both Williamson Prep and Garden Heights. Although Starr does not find a way to stop performing Respectability, she is able to use it to her advantage instead of using it as a defense mechanism from black discrimination. She understands that her security as a black person is not, nor will it ever be, contingent upon her behavior and juxtaposition to the dominant American culture. Being the “exceptional negro” often comes at the cost of individuality which is why Starr’s growth in the novel is centered around her ability to make her own decisions for herself. She learns that she is unable to live the way other people live and she will be rejected many times by the standards of American culture. Respectability Politics and

exceptionalism grant access not acceptance into dominant American culture (O'Neal ch. 2). It provides opportunities for black Americans, yet it is not veil that can be used to negate or combat the discriminations that are heavily associated with blackness.

Black Respectability grants access not acceptance into the dominant American culture. Black Respectability is the assimilation to majority culture in America. Starr Carter's experience with Respectability and racial profiling illustrates the importance of being aware of one's place in society and the challenges of the minority culture. *The Hate U Give* illustrates how the ideas of Respectability Politics have been ingrained in Black culture and is evident in Black communities. This is similar to the ideas of thinkers like DuBois wrote about race correcting as a method of accessing human and civil rights. Today, Black people still hold on to the notions that Respectability will save them; however, this is not the case. Black people still face dangers of police brutality, mass incarceration, and scientific racism. While criticisms of Respectability Politics are not new, this analysis shows how the expectation that Black Americans should behave in a performatively respectable ("white") way in order to be treated well is not only unfair, but also ineffective against the real dangers of racism and in fact often detrimental to one's psychological well-being.

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