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THE HATE U GIVE AS COUNTERNARRATIVE:
A RHETORICAL SITE OF COMPETING FRAMES & THE DISRUPTION OF DOMINANT NARRATIVES THROUGH COUNTER-STORYTELLING & HOMING

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English & Writing Studies:
Composition & Rhetoric

by
Jackeline Espinoza Camacho
May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Angie Thomas's novel, *The Hate U Give*, is an African American Young Adult novel (AAYA) that captures the violence and devastating effects of police brutality and the gruesome rhetorical strategies that the dominant public sphere uses to criminalize, regulate, and dehumanize Black Americans. In this paper, I use the theoretical framework of counter-storytelling, the theoretical concept of homing, and the rhetorical strategy of framing, to analyze how Thomas exposes the ways in which the dominant public sphere silences, excludes, and discredits the voices and experiences of Black people to give readers access to the dominant public sphere in order to critique its foundations. Through counter-storytelling, homing, and rhetorical framing, *The Hate U Give* constructs a new counterpublic where the voices at the margins are brought to the center, where fiction and reality are interconnected, and where counternarratives model for readers how to confront and deconstruct systemic racism and oppression.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The traumatic and destructive consequences of police brutality that ravage Black communities leaving nothing but violence, pain, trauma, and death, are vividly and intimately captured in Angie Thomas's novel, *The Hate U Give*. Told from the perspective of the main character, Starr—a Black teenager who witnesses the murder of her Black childhood best friend, Khalil—readers become witnesses to the trauma, paranoia, rage, and social activism that result from police brutality. Khalil, who is not armed at the time of the fatal police encounter that claims his life, goes from being a victim of police brutality—at the hands of a white police officer—to being framed by mass media outlets as a criminal, thug, and drug-dealer. Having been the only witness to this act of racial violence, Starr is at a crossroads: Should she remain silent and allow the world to criminalize her best friend, or should she speak up and challenge the racist stereotypes that society forces on Khalil and the Black community? As Starr navigates through her decision—and as protests for justice intensify—we are submerged into the trauma and anxiety that constantly consume Starr, and the anger and anguish that ultimately give her the courage to stand up to police brutality and challenge the systemic structures of oppression and racism that silence and subjugate Black bodies.

The growing canon of African American literature and the resurging trend of book banning in the U.S. brings me to my analysis of Angie Thomas's YA novel, *The Hate U Give*. Previous research around this novel has framed it in multiple ways, including as a herstorical narrative, a coming-of-rage story, a counternarrative, and a Black Lives Matter novel. I expand on the power and influence of counter-storytelling (the act of telling stories from within marginalized communities to resist the misconceptions produced by dominant narratives) by focusing on the novel's use of rhetorical strategies to challenge the anti-Blackness rhetoric and biased framing that present themselves through the stock stories circulated by dominant white society. I explore how stock stories are used to normalize the criminalization, oppression, and infliction of lethal violence against Black bodies via institutions such as law enforcement and news media outlets. The intense emotional response and the call for social and racial justice that the novel elicits from its readers, has led me to my research questions: How does the portrayal of racism in the novel teach and inform readers about the consequences and intricacies of real racism against Black Americans? What rhetorical elements are active within the novel that affect the reader, challenge mainstream stock narratives that instigate and uphold racism and racial violence against African Americans, and give readers access to the dominant public sphere via its deconstruction of it? Guided by these questions, I explore how *The Hate U Give*, as a counternarrative—a narrative that counters stock stories—functions as a site of "competing frames," where the Black community challenges and threatens the narratives of criminalization that spread through mass media outlets. By relying on the power of counter-storytelling to offer readers intimate access to the racial experience of Black Americans, Thomas informs readers about the consequences of racism and models how to oppose the hyper-criminalization of their Black bodies in mainstream news outlets.

I expand on the concept of counternarratives and the rhetorical action of counter-storytelling by intersecting the theoretical concept of *homing* and the rhetorical strategy of *framing* with *counter-storytelling* to uncover the effect that these rhetorical strategies have on readers and to demonstrate how this novel deconstructs, reconfigures, and resists the stock stories that suffocate and hold Black Americans hostage in systems of mass incarceration, poverty, and fatal racial violence. Through counter-storytelling, I illustrate how *The Hate U Give* deconstructs and challenges the stock stories that dominant society circulates about Black bodies by resisting the racial language and subjective framing used by mass media to criminalize, villainize, dehumanize, and discredit the lived experiences of Black people. By applying the concept of homing—the practice of weaving together silenced stories of pain, violence, resistance, love, and community to reimagine new possibilities—I reveal how counter-storytelling resists stock stories and fosters community amongst those who are oppressed by uniting and empowering them through shared experiences of pain, violence, love, resistance, and compassion. Lastly, by closely analyzing the rhetorics of framing—the ways in which information is shaped and presented—I expose the oppressive strategies that dominant society uses to oppress people of color and to discredit their experiences when they challenge the authority and power of white supremacy. Together, counter-storytelling, homing, and framing, give rise to *The Hate U Give* as a counterpublic—a community rooted together in shared experiences of oppression, violence, and marginalization that co-construct a new reality where their voices and experiences are valued and heard and where they resist the language and rules of the oppressor by reimagining and redefining their lived experiences on their own terms.

Literature Review

To better understand the rhetorical power of *The Hate U Give*, it is important to highlight its rippling effects in public discourse and the ways it has empowered marginalized voices. Adam Levin—a Research Associate at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa—frames the novel as a "herstorical" narrative that centers Black female protagonists to ensure representation of Black girls and women who are often left in the dark because of the focus on Black male perspectives and experiences (148). Lashon Daley, Director of the National Center for the Study of Children's Literature, similarly discusses the double standard that Black girls face in contrast to their white counterparts by labeling *The Hate U Give* as a "coming of (r)age narrative" arguing that "there is no coming of age for Black girls" due to the ways that slavery and racial oppression have "adulterated how their age, rates of physical maturation, and social development are constructed and perceived" (1036).

Daley focuses on the policing and defining of Starr’s Black identity, and the consequences of how it is perceived within the novel and the film adaptation. Levin’s and Daley’s focus on female protagonists brings from the shadow of Black male experiences, the different ways that Black girls and women are affected and constrained by racism both on a personal and social level.

Many scholars also note the effects that this racism has on its victims—not only highlighting the ways in which racism affects identity construction and self-perception, but also detailing strategies to counter its ravaging effects. For instance, Gabrielle Owen, Professor of English, uses “the politics of respectability” to analyze how Starr functions within the limits and norms of this framework that forces her to code-switch with her white friends to appear as an educated, polite, and respectful Black individual (250). Owen explores how Starr navigates and negotiates her Black identity, ultimately transcending the limitations of “the politics of respectability” and enabling important discussions about race and identity and what it means to be Black in a society where being white is the norm (251). This coincides with Levin’s argument that “herstorical” narratives like *The Hate U Give*, not only create a space for the representation of Black girls, but also encourages them to become activists and effect social change. The novel’s ability to focus on change supports Daniel Tulino et al.’s framing of *The Hate U Give* as a “counternarrative” that resists anti-Blackness by “challeng[ing] the perception of Blackness in American media and society” (32). Tulino et al. argue that *The Hate U Give* counters racist mainstream narratives by giving voice and access to Black experiences, thus echoing Levin's and Owen's argument that Thomas's novel empowers marginalized voices by modeling what social activism from the margins can look like and how it can effect social change.

Adding to the research on the power of counternarratives and counter-storytelling, Lee A. Bell, Professor and Director of Education, frames counternarratives as resistant stories that disrupt the stock stories used by dominant society to spread and uphold racism, white supremacy, and the oppression and silencing of marginalized voices (71). Resistance stories, according to Bell, empower marginalized voices to use their experiences and histories to foster collective power and community (72). Similarly, Professor of English, Aja Y. Martinez, defines counter-storytelling as "a method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told. Counterstory as a methodology serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (34). The importance of Bell's characterization of counternarratives as narratives that disrupt stock stories, and Martinez's framing of counter-storytelling as an action of resistance through the telling of marginalized stories can best be understood through the concept of homing—developed by Professor of Rhetoric, V. Jo Hsu. Hsu defines homing "as a concept [that] offers an understanding and method of storytelling that can examine and remake communal identities and values and aspirations that hold people together" (10). Together, Bell, Martinez, and Hsu facilitate a discussion about the ways in which *The Hate U Give* counters narratives that criminalize Black Americans on the basis of skin and how Thomas uses counter-storytelling and homing to not only demonstrate the collective power that results from a community coming together in times of hardship but to illustrate how activism empowers Black communities to reimagine and redefine their communities and experiences.

Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Emily Knox, professors of Library Science, echo Bell's, Martinez's, and Hsu's framing of storytelling by arguing that it is a "nonconfrontational" rhetorical tool that "invites the reader to suspend judgement" by acting like a mirror for marginalized voices and a window for white readers to experience the realities of marginalized people (Hughes-Hassell 221)—thus, enabling a community between previously divided social groups. In addition, Knox offers a sociopolitical extension of Hughes-Hassell's argument by discussing the importance of diverse books like, *The Hate U Give,* that rhetorically function as mirrors and windows, and that resist the book banning efforts of elitists that try to censor stories that challenge their normative storytelling strategies that are designed to uphold their white privilege (29).

The scholarship around *The Hate U Give* that highlights its function as a herstory, a coming of (r)age novel, and a counternarrative, has laid the pathway for my analysis of the novel as a rhetorical site of competing frames where Thomas exposes the ways that dominant public discourse functions to maintain and enforce the hegemonic values that criminalize, discredit, and disenfranchise Black people; where readers are given access to the Black community's private sphere to counter mainstream depictions of Black people and to reveal some of the rhetorical strategies of resistance from within the Black community; and lastly, where readers are given intimate access to Starr's personal thoughts, experiences, and journey to model and inspire readers to fight for racial justice by becoming social activists within their communities. Taken together, the effects of this rhetorical approach through a public and private sphere lens—facilitated through framing and merged with counter-storytelling—reflects intersectional solidarity and resistance that in turn, mirrors Hsu's concept of homing.

CHAPTER TWO

KHALIL'S DEATH: A SITE OF COMPETING FRAMES WITHIN THE PRIVATE & PUBLIC SPHERE

Murder vs. Incident

As a counternarrative, Thomas's novel functions as a site of competing frames where the Black community challenges and threatens the power and authority of the dominant public sphere, and where dominant society tries to silence and discredit the Black community to oppress them. Drawing from Martinez's definition of counter-storytelling, I demonstrate how *The Hate U Give* counters and resists the narratives of criminalization that spread through mass media outlets by exposing the bias framing practices of the dominant public sphere that seeks to dishonor and silence Black voices while violently oppressing Black communities. By using Starr's character as the vessel—or in Hughes-Hassell's and Knox's words, the window—through which readers gain intimate access to the racial experience of Black Americans, Thomas engages in counter-storytelling to disclose the power embedded in rhetorical framing that makes possible both the omission of information that benefits dominant society and the revelation of information that challenges the power and authority of the dominant public sphere—which consequently liberates and empowers the oppressed.

Khalil's death creates a site of competing frames, where on the one hand, the dominant public sphere rules Khalil's death an incident justified by the racial stereotypes accepted in society, and on the other hand, his death is ruled a murder by his best friend Starr, his family, and his Black community. Within the first couple of pages of *The Hate U Give*, Thomas frames Khalil as a charismatic, loving, and caring character with a painful traumatic past that forces him to grow up too fast. Detailing the abandonment of his mother, the sickness of his grandmother, and the poverty that forces him to choose between paying bills or buying groceries, persuades readers to feel compassion for Khalil—to see his softness within the sharp edges of his reality. But Khalil's life is taken away just as fast as readers fall in love with his personality and friendship with Starr. Victim to the racial bias of an armed, white police officer—known as One-Fifteen—unarmed Khalil is fatally shot multiple times. Through Starr's narration, readers witness firsthand, the death of Khalil, seeing it for what it is—a murder. Using imagery to situate readers within this deadly traumatic scene, Starr narrates the murder of Khalil, interweaving the social rules that Black Americans must follow to increase their survival rate when encountering law enforcement:

> My parents haven't raised me to fear the police, just to be smart around them. They told me it's not smart to move while a cop has his back to you.
> Khalil does. He comes to his door.
> It's not smart to make a sudden move.
> Khalil does. He opens the driver's door.
> 'You okay, Starr—'
> *Pow!*

> One. Khalil's body jerks. Blood splatters from his back. He holds on to the door to keep himself upright.
>
> *Pow!*
>
> Two. Khalil gasps.
>
> *Pow!*
>
> Three. Khalil looks at me, stunned.
>
> He falls to the ground.
>
> I'm ten again, watching Natasha drop.
>
> (Thomas 23)

Starr's witnessing of Khalil's death serves as the private sphere perspective—untainted by the racial ideologies or normative narratives that the public sphere circulates. Through Starr, readers get to see what the public doesn't get to see about Khalil's death, and they get to know Khalil in a way that the public does not.

On the contrary, law enforcement's perception and the media's portrayal of Khalil and his death represent the dominant public sphere perspective—framing Khalil's death as an incident, provoked by an aggressive criminal that broke the law and threatened the safety and authority of a white police officer, One-Fifteen. Because law enforcement is an entity with power and authority, with access to mainstream media outlets, they have the privilege to construct, circulate, and control a narrative about Khalil that benefits them and protects them from critique and accountability. To better understand the framing power that law enforcement and mainstream media outlets share, Scholar of Rhetoric and Professor of Communication, Dana Cloud, argues that “the demonstrated power of elites to determine what information circulates as truth” (56) contributes to how “the frames of powerful elites circulate more generally and more successfully than those of subordinates” (62). The privileging of the framing tactics of those in power become evident as Thomas exposes the rhetorical strategies of the dominant public sphere through the motivated efforts of law enforcement who try to force Starr to incriminate Khalil so that he fits their stock story that will shift the blame to his actions and character and deflect from their rooted practices in slave patrolling and racial criminalization. In interrogating Starr, the detectives try to portray Khalil as an “aggressor” to control and fabricate a narrative infused with racial ideologies that will protect law enforcement from critique and accountability while justifying the killing of Khalil. The detectives ask Starr, “‘Did Khalil comply? /Did Khalil seem irate during this exchange? / Because Khalil was hesitant, right? / But Khalil didn’t stay put, did he? /Now, do you know if Khalil sold narcotics?’” (Thomas 99-102). Through this interrogation, readers can see the competing frames and how the detectives are trying to control the narrative of Khalil’s death by framing him as a criminal—thus, trying to justify killing him.

When powerful entities like law enforcement and mass media conspire to circulate the ideology that by default Black males are criminal and dangerous, this ideology circulates as a “truth,” gaining credibility the more it is repeated and presented to the public. To fully grasp the rhetorical effect and power of circulating ideologies or ideas until they become truths, Cloud explains that “Truthiness is operating when an idea is repeated so often that people naturally take it to be true. Truthiness is also a feature of the rhetoric of the powerful…people in power create the terms of reality to which others are subjected and under which they must operate” (13). Although Starr knows the truth surrounding Khalil’s death, and her witnessing of his death counters the stock story that law enforcement constructs, her testimony, within the walls of the police station, is suppressed and silenced by the power and authority of law enforcement. Thus, even though Khalil was unarmed and unthreatening, the mere fact that he was a Black male, was sufficient to frame him within a stock story that further reiterates the supposed criminality and aggression of Black males.

The stock story that Khalil was the aggressor in the encounter with law enforcement and the framing of him as a drug-dealer and thug is further circulated by the power and influence of mainstream media. Before Starr gets the chance to testify or do an interview about her and Khalil’s encounter with law enforcement, One-Fifteen’s father goes on national television to defend his son and promote the stock narrative that frames Khalil as the violent criminal that threatened the safety of One-Fifteen. One-Fifteen’s father narrates the events of that tragic night as if he were there, stating that “‘My son was afraid for his life. He only wanted to get home to his wife and kids’” (Thomas 244). His statement automatically demands sympathy from the public, as he frames One-Fifteen as a husband and a father terrified of what two Black unarmed teenagers could do to him. He continues to state, "'And they kept glancing at each other, like they were up to something. Brian says that's when he got scared, 'cause they could've taken him down if they teamed up'" (Thomas 246). Underlying this statement is an assumption, an ideological link that associates Black people to violence, crime, and aggression. This ideological link is best explained by Professor of Criminal Justice, Melissa H. Barlow, who argues that the media's "stories on crime and the violence associated with African American struggles helps to account for the historical development of contemporary ideological linkages between crime and 'young black males'" (155). In other words, the way the media has presented crime and race problems in America, has helped construct an ideological link that not only associates Black males to violent crime, but also conjures fear in the minds of dominant white America. Therefore, what One-Fifteen feared was not two unarmed teenagers, but their Black skin.

The circulation of ideological links is not the only rhetorical device that dominant society uses to further incriminate, villainize, and dehumanize Khalil. As One-Fifteen's father speaks about the supposed innocence of his son—an officer, patriot, and protector of American ideals—pictures of One-Fifteen flash on the background, framing him as a husband, a father, a follower of God, and an officer serving his community. Starr, in disbelief, describes what she sees on the television: "Pictures flash on the screen. One-Fifteen smiles with his arms draped around a blurred-out woman…They show him with a smiley golden retriever, with his pastor and some fellow deacons…and then in his police uniform" (Thomas 245). Cloud describes this rhetorical strategy as media frames—"a set of principles of selection, omission, and emphasis that shapes an audience's perception of events" (80). Mainstream media chose to emphasize the parts of One-Fifteen that are relatable to the public, that demonstrate his humanity and devotion to the community he lives in and the community he serves. Likewise, the media chose to circulate a "thugshot" of Khalil, one where he "wears a smirk, gripping a handful of money and throwing up a sideways peace sign"—an image that further reinforced the stock narrative that he was a drug-dealing gang member (Thomas 339). Thus, these media frames shift public support to One-Fifteen and justify the killing of Khalil—a suspected drug-dealing thug.

As Khalil's "thugshot" and law enforcement's stock story about him gains circulation and popularity—with the aid of mainstream media—Khalil becomes a trending title: "Khalil Harris, a Suspected Drug Dealer" (Thomas 104). Although this title aims to persuade the dominant public that Khalil was a criminal, because readers witnessed his death, this label instead exposes the rhetorical strategies of the dominant public sphere that serve to protect it from critique and accountability. The efforts of the public sphere are further emphasized and supported by One-Fifteen's father as he continues to humanize and victimize his son by criminalizing and dehumanizing Khalil and the Black community. One-Fifteen's father states, "'My son loved working in the neighborhood. He always wanted to make a difference in the lives there'" (Thomas 245). Starr recognizes his words as racist rhetoric—words meant to strip her and her community from their humanity. In response, Starr states, "Funny. Slave masters thought they were making a difference in black people's lives too. Saving them from their own 'wild African ways.' Same shit, different century. I wish people like them would stop thinking that people like me need saving" (Thomas 245-46). Starr counters his racist rhetoric and his strategy to dehumanize Khalil and her community by revealing to the reader the consequences of such rhetoric and its roots in slave-patrolling practices. One-Fifteen's father reiterates, "'Brian's a good boy. He only wanted to get home to his family,'" to insinuate that Khalil and Starr were plotting to take his son down and One-Fifteen had no choice but to shoot Khalil (Thomas 247). By showing readers how the dominant public sphere and mainstream media can spread lies and fabricate misleading narratives, Thomas gives readers access to the dominant public sphere.

While One-Fifteen was in a position of power over a teenage boy who was unarmed, Khalil's Black skin was perceived as a threat—highlighting the racial ideologies of the dominant public sphere that trickle down into policing practices. In order to clearly understand how it was possible for One-Fifteen to become the victim in the murder of Khalil, Cloud explains that "When there are competing frames, there is a struggle for control over the shaping of experience. The influence of a particular frame is determined by the capacity of a group to control technologies of mediation" (62). Given law enforcement's position of power and its connections to news outlets, both entities of power were able to collectively fabricate a narrative of Khalil that shielded law enforcement while protecting white privilege. For instance, mass media claimed "'There are multiple reports that a gun was found in the car. There is also suspicion that the victim was a drug dealer as well as a gang member. Officials have not confirmed if any of this is true'" (Thomas 140). Looking closely at the diction used in the anchor's claims, it is undoubtedly stated that the labels being placed on Khalil are all based on assumptions. The efforts of law enforcement and mass media to draw attention to Khalil's supposed criminality speaks to Cloud's argument that "frames are powerful rhetorical entities that" make "some information more salient than other information" in order to shift public opinion in a way that supports the narrative constructed by the dominant public sphere (61). Because these claims are coming from the news and because they are endorsed by law enforcement, the public is prone to accepting them as "truths." However, the effect of these rhetorical strategies on readers who witnessed Khalil's death and know him in a way that the public does not, is that it pushes them to critique not just the morality of news reporting agencies, but the motives behind these agencies and law enforcement. Thus, highlighting the novel's counter-storytelling efforts that resist and deconstruct the rhetorical strategies of the dominant public sphere that seeks to discredit, silence, and oppress the experiences of Black people.

Thomas's rhetorical usage of competing frames facilitates a discussion about the ethics of news reporting and the power relations between law enforcement and news agencies. By exposing the process by which power entities fabricate narratives and circulate them as “truths,” Thomas grants readers access to the dominant public sphere in an unconventional way that does not make them members of the dominant public sphere but members of a counterpublic—made up of the silenced voices that have been exploited, disenfranchised, and abused by the conventions of white supremacy. Membership to the counterpublic that Thomas fosters within the novel, allows readers to classify the stock stories surrounding Khalil as what Barlow would label, a “moral panic campaign” (152). Barlow argues that a moral panic campaign, as a rhetorical strategy of the elite, influences the public by appealing “to popular fears about violence and unrest among racial minorities” (153). By educating readers to identify these rhetorical strategies aimed at silencing, disenfranchising, and oppressing Black people, Thomas encourages readers to reflect on their own role in society. This self-reflection is best described by Bell, who argues that resistance novels—like *The Hate U Give*—encourages young readers “to consider their own roles as actors and citizens in the public arena” (74). By giving readers access to the dominant public sphere, Thomas is educating and informing readers about the devastating consequences of racism while also providing a space for young readers and adults to “engage as social critics, develop a…strong critique of racism and other forms of injustice, and generate effective ways to challenge oppressive conditions in their schools and communities” (Bell 75). The rhetorical effect that this access to the rhetorical strategies of the dominant public sphere has on readers, is that it not only empowers them to deconstruct the oppressive tactics of institutions of authority but makes readers aware of their own power and ability to effect change and social and racial justice.

The media's criminalization of Khalil and Black communities continues to emphasize the rhetorical power of competing frames that create a power struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor, where the former seeks to expose the truth and the latter seeks to conceal it. By continuing to analyze the power of competing frames, readers become aware of the real reason why people of color are labeled a "threat" to dominant society. As the novel progresses, it becomes evident that the "threat" that people of color pose is not one of violence and criminality—as the dominant public sphere would argue—but a threat to the dominance of white supremacy and the power and credibility of law enforcement as an entity. To clarify, the fact that Starr is a witness to the murder of Khalil threatens the narrative and frame that law enforcement tries to normalize, and when silencing Starr through intimidation does not work, they resort to discrediting her and her community to prevent the public from supporting her and turning against police.

As the media conspires with law enforcement to criminalize, label, and discredit the Black community as unlawful, disobedient, and unorganized, they aim to justify not only the policing and regulation of Black bodies in the novel, but the murder of Khalil, who came from such community. Starr describes this negative and biased portrayal of her community—as it is shown on national television—as one of rejection and defamation:

> I tense as footage of my neighborhood, my home, is shown. It's like they picked the worse parts—the drug addicts roaming the streets, the broken down Cedar Grove projects, gangbangers flashing signs, bodies on the sidewalks with white sheets over them. What about Mrs. Rooks and her cakes? Mr. Lewis and his haircuts? Mr. Reuben? The clinic? My family? Me?
>
> (Thomas 245)

The media chooses to frame Starr's community as crime and poverty ridden—choosing to show the parts that reinforce their racist ideologies, and not the parts that challenge and threaten those ideologies and stock stories. This rhetorical choice reflects Cloud's argument that the media portrays the struggles and the resistance of marginalized people in "trivializing and misleading ways in their selection of images, sound, voice-over, editing, and other techniques" (61). Parts like the community members coming together and lifting each other up, where business owners know their customers by name, where people look after each other and work hard to break free from the systems designed to oppress and enslave them are omitted or discredited by the stock images that the media chooses to circulate as "truths." To better understand the rhetorical strategy of biased framing and its connection to stock stories, Martinez quotes Richard Delgado, who is a Professor of Law and a Critical Race Theorist, to argue that stock stories “choose and pick among available facts and present a picture of the world that best befits and supports their positions of relative power” (33-34). By cherry-picking images of the Black community that support their stock narrative about Khalil and the “uncivilized” characteristics of Black communities, the dominant public sphere is able to discredit Starr’s testimony and justify Khalil’s death in the eyes of the public.

As a response to the stock stories that law enforcement and mainstream media are circulating about Khalil and Black communities, Starr and her father, Maverick, resort to counter-storytelling to counter the media’s framing of Black communities as crime and drug-ridden. Starr and Maverick offer readers a private sphere perspective about the realities of Black experiences that the media does not show. Starr argues, “That’s the problem. We let people say stuff, and they say it so much that it becomes okay to them and normal for us” (Thomas 252). Starr echoes Cloud’s argument about the construction and circulation of “truths,” and the consequences it has on marginalized groups. Because powerful people like dominant society “create the terms of reality to which others are subjected and under which they must operate” (Cloud 13), they are able to normalize oppressive systems like racism, mass incarceration, police brutality, and poverty that severely affect marginalized people. Maverick counters these “terms of reality” and the media’s portrayal of his community by exposing the root causes of Black peoples’ continued oppression and criminalization. Maverick explains the impact of drugs on his community and how dominant society has conditioned Black people into believing that they need to either consume drugs to survive the hardships of life or sell them to remain financially afloat (Thomas 170). He continues explaining that being conditioned to accept both options as realities, only contributes to further oppression and criminalization because Black people will either be unable to get a job because of their drug addiction or will be incarcerated for selling them—thus sustaining prison as a “billion-dollar industry” and remaining hostage to a cycle of abuse (Thomas 170). By using counter-storytelling to expose the rhetorical conventions of the dominant public sphere, Thomas educates and informs readers about the intricacies of systemic racism and the severe consequences it has on marginalized people.

CHAPTER THREE

HONORING KHALIL THROUGH HOMING & COUNTER-STORYTELLING

Formation of a Counterpublic

Starr and Maverick illustrate some of the rhetorical strategies of resistance from within the Black community that help disempower the stock stories and derogatory labels that spread misconceptions about Black people. As Starr and Maverick discuss systemic racism, Starr's memory takes her back to some of her last moments with Khalil. She recalls Khalil arguing that the music of rapper, Tupac Shakur, was still relevant to the daily struggles of Black Americans. He emphasized Tupac's resistance to the racial stereotypes that criminalize Black people by paying close attention to the lyrics of his songs and the meaning behind his words. Giving Starr a glimpse into the rhetorical power of Tupac's words, Khalil explained that Tupac redefined the meaning of "thug life" and made it stand for "'The Hate U Give Little Infants F---s Everybody'" (Thomas 168). What Khalil and Tupac meant by "T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E." was that whatever hate society feeds Black youth will one day affect the entire community (Black and white) in a negative way (Thomas 168). Hate, in this sense, takes on different roles, be it institutional racism, police brutality, mass incarceration, poverty, violence, oppression, and ironically, even resistance, as it crosses the boundaries of time and space.

Tupac's redefining of a term constantly used by white dominant society to criminalize and regulate Black Americans, and Khalil's mediation of the term, reflects the practices of the concept of homing. Hsu argues that homing allows marginalized people to “challenge and reinvent the meanings, values, and practices that condition social belongings” (26). By reimagining and redefining the meaning of “T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E.” Tupac was not only able to resist this derogatory label used to oppress and criminalize his Black community but was able to change the narrative surrounding “T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E.” and hold accountable white dominant society for the social, economic, and political oppression it has systemically forced upon Black people. The effects of the hate given to Black youth is further expressed when Starr realizes that “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” (Thomas 171). While the consequences of hate are expected to be negative, Starr positively redirects the hate she is forced to feel by white dominant society by focusing instead on the communal support that she and Khalil are receiving from strangers within her community and the empowerment she is feeling through the shared experience of pain and resistance. This shared experience of emotions and community reflects Hsu’s concept of homing that draws readers into the private sphere of marginalized people to capture their experiences and acts of resistance from within their own community and not from the ideological perspective of the dominant public sphere.

Starr’s realization of the power invested in unity and the power embedded in shared experiences of pain, violence, and oppression, connects her to an internal urge to resist institutionalized racism and systems of oppression by evoking a counterpublic as a form of resistance. Phyllis M. Ryder—Assistant Professor of English—claims that a counterpublic is made up of marginalized people whose voices and experiences challenge the conventions of the dominant public sphere that seeks to silence, dismiss, and discredit their experiences and “knowledge-making practices” (527). Within a counterpublic, the practice of storytelling is essential to highlight the experiences and knowledge-making practices of people who have been disenfranchised and silenced, as well as to build community in shared experience (Ryder 529). This reimagining and redefining of the possibilities of existence and the act of storytelling to foster community, echoes Hsu’s concept of homing. Specifically, homing uses storytelling to “deliberately confront[s] systems of power and representation” enabling “diasporic subjects to deconstruct, co-construct, and maneuver among sites of (un)belonging” (Hsu 9). To clarify, homing draws attention to the stories of marginalized communities to explore how their own storytelling practices from within their private sphere allows them to disrupt or reconstruct the stock stories circulated in mainstream society. Homing brings attention to how marginalized people redefine and reimagine their existence in their own terms outside of the beliefs and ideologies of the dominant public sphere to create their own counterpublic where they are not defined or constrained by the misconceptions produced by dominant society. Together, counterpublics, counter-storytelling, and homing work to resist the silencing, exclusionary, and oppressive practices of the dominant public sphere, and to create and reimagine new possibilities of existence and new spaces of belonging.

Having found her own sense of agency, Starr "maneuvers among sites of (un)belonging" (Hsu 9) by co-constructing a space for Khalil's life to exist outside of the stereotypes and assumptions stamped on his Black body by white dominant society. Starr effectively engages in counter-storytelling and homing by starting a blog on Tumblr that celebrates Khalil's life. Her blog, "The Khalil I Know," (Thomas 204) functions rhetorically as homing, to interweave histories of pain, love, and friendship. Through the concept of homing, readers are moved to mourn the death of Khalil along with Starr, her family, and her community. Starr shares a childhood memory of Khalil where they are four years old, sitting in a bathtub. She states, "I'm looking away from the camera. Ms. Rosalie's sitting on the side of the tub, beaming at us, and Khalil's beaming right back at her" (Thomas 205). This image gives readers access to Khalil's personal life, one not circulated in the media, that highlights his humanity and tenderness—a memory where he is loved and is loving towards others.

Thomas makes use of counter-storytelling, imagery, homing, and pathos to elicit an emotional response from readers and force them to feel the immense void that Khalil's death left behind. Starr shares a core memory of Khalil and their goodbye routine from when they were kids to emphasize the immeasurable emptiness that police brutality has forced her to experience:

> As we leave, I remember how Khalil used to run up to the car when I was about to go, the sun shining on the grease lines that separated his cornrows. The glimmer in his eyes would be just as bright. He'd knock on the window, I'd let it down, and he'd say with a snaggletooth grin, 'See you later alligator.'
>
> (Thomas 66)

The emotional effect of this memory not only makes readers mourn Khalil's death, but forces readers to relive this memory with Starr. The tragedy of his death emphasizes the severe consequences of racism and racial violence making it more urgent to counter the racist ideologies that facilitate and justify police brutality. By choosing to bring attention to Khalil's charismatic, tender, and loving personality through the memories that people have of him—a collection of stories posted on a public blog where members of the counterpublic can participate—demonstrates how Thomas engages in counter-storytelling to deconstruct mainstream depictions of Black people and their supposed criminality and violence. This blog, which counters the biased frames of the media and police who sought to mold Khalil into their stock narrative, evokes the rhetorical power of a counterpublic. Ryder quotes Scott Lyons, Director of Native American Studies, to define the people of a counterpublic as "'a group of human beings united by history, language, culture…a community joined in union for a common purpose: the survival and flourishing of the people itself'" (Ryder 530). Through this blog, Starr and her community interact and form an online community around Khalil's memory by liking and re-blogging pictures of him that challenge and diminish the rhetorical power of the "thugshot" that mainstream media used to criminalize him. The rhetorical function of this blog creates a digital site for a counterpublic, where Khalil's memory is celebrated and honored and where Starr and her community represent the people of a counterpublic, united by their shared history of racial violence, their language, and their culture. This co-constructed digital counterpublic creates a space where Starr and her community can flourish freely without their Blackness being defined or regulated by white dominant society—thus reflecting Hsu's argument that homing allows marginalized people to co-construct unrestrictive spaces of belonging and existing in their own terms.

When the court makes the decision to not indict the white police officer who shot and killed Khalil, it threatens to discredit and silence the rhetorical power of Starr's voice. Starr must decide between allowing the dominant public sphere to dismiss her voice, and therefore her testimony, or speaking out publicly about the murder of Khalil and revealing herself as the witness. It is at this crossroads, where "T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E." comes into play again, and the hate that Starr feels against her, Khalil, and her Black community because of this court ruling, empowers and motivates her to speak out publicly. In speaking out publicly, Starr refuses to be silenced and discredited and refuses to allow the media and dominant society to dehumanize, criminalize and villainize Khalil. Starr cries out in anguish, “Khalil’s death wasn’t horrible enough to be considered a crime. But damn, what about his life? He was once a walking, talking human being. He had family. He had friends. He had dreams. None of it fucking mattered. He was just a thug who deserved to die” (Thomas 388). Starr’s frustration not only elicits an emotional response from readers, forcing them to feel empathy, anger, and frustration for Khalil’s life and his unjustified death, but it also refuses to allow the world to focus on the alleged criminality of Khalil. Starr refuses to be consumed by hate by choosing to focus on the fact that Khalil lived, that he was a son, a grandson, a brother, and a friend. In this sense, “T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E.” rhetorically functions to hold the dominant public sphere accountable for its orchestration of mass incarceration, police brutality, systemic racism and inflicted social, economic, and political oppression. “T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E.” repurposes the power of hate to empower marginalized voices to publicly condemn and resist the oppressive conventions of the dominant public sphere. Thus, by refusing to allow dominant society to stamp Khalil’s body with racial stereotypes, and refusing to allow Khalil to be consumed in the debris left behind by the destruction of systemic racism and police brutality, Starr and her community disrupt and deconstruct the stock stories that frame Black Americans as criminal and violent.

As readers watch Starr shift from witness to activist, the rhetorical power of counter-storytelling and counterpublics becomes visible, making possible the transformation of hate from an oppressive tool to an empowering one. In anger and frustration, Starr exclaims, "'I did everything right, and it didn't make a fucking difference. I've gotten death threats, cops harassed my family, somebody shot into my house, all kinds of shit. And for what? Justice Khalil won't get? They don't give a fuck about us, so fine. I no longer give a fuck'" (Thomas 389-90). The rhetorical conventions of the dominant public sphere gave Starr hate by harassing and threatening her friends and family in order to silence her and forced her to challenge the power and authority of dominant society. By not allowing hate to consume and control her, Starr breaks free from the overreaching grasp of systemic racism. This freedom allows Starr to find the power in her voice to disrupt the biased frames and stock stories of the dominant public sphere that not only physically took Khalil away from her but tried to also take away the memory of him by tarnishing his name with racial stereotypes. As Starr makes a full circle back to where Khalil was shot and killed, she is ready to publicly speak out and reveal her identity as the witness to the crowd protesting for justice for Khalil. Starr takes her attorney's bullhorn and exclaims, "'Everybody wants to talk about how Khalil died. But this isn't about how Khalil died. It's about the fact that he lived. His life mattered. Khalil lived!'" (Thomas 412). Chanting for Khalil's life emphasizes that he was a human being who was once a son, a grandson, a brother, a friend, and a community member. Emphasizing the fact that he was a human being who lived, deconstructs the stock story that the media and dominant society fabricated and circulated about Khalil to reduce him to a thug who sold drugs and therefore, deserved to die because of the threat he posed to the safety of white dominant society.

In revealing her identity as the witness and in joining the protestors who are fighting for justice for Khalil, Starr co-constructs a counterpublic with her community where they refuse to be silenced, erased, and discredited. Watching—with a sense of empowerment—what she and her community have constructed together, Starr thinks to herself, “People are realizing and shouting and marching and demanding. They’re not forgetting. I think that’s the most important part. Khalil, I’ll never forget. I’ll never give up. I’ll never be quiet. I promise” (Thomas 444). Underlying this realization is the power embedded in unity and shared experiences. Starr and her community do what the dominant public sphere functions to suppress and prevent. They have joined together to stand against the injustices perpetrated by entities of power like law enforcement, mainstream media, and dominant society. Starr and her community have realized their collective power and this realization comes with a cost for the dominant public sphere. By refusing to be regulated because of their Black bodies, Starr and her community pose a threat and a challenge to the stock stories and framing practices of the dominant public sphere. The hate that dominant society feeds to Black youth proved to be insufficient to disunify and demolish Black peoples’ sense of community, resistance, and collective power.

In order to understand the interweaving of fiction and reality at the end of the novel, it is important to closely analyze the rhetorical significance in the name of the street where Khalil was shot and murdered and where Starr transforms from witness to activist. When Starr returns to the spot where she witnessed Khalil take his last breath, she is consumed with anguish and trauma as she is forced to relive that horrific moment once again. Starr narrates, “The protestors are on Carnation. Where it happened. I haven’t been back here since that night. Knowing this is where Khalil…I stare too hard, the crowd disappears, and I see him lying in the street. The whole thing plays out before my eyes like a horror movie on repeat. He looks at me for the last time and—” (Thomas 407-08). Carnation Street—where Khalil’s life was brutally taken and where Starr was left with a permanent scar in the form of trauma—becomes symbolically important not just for Starr’s transformation, but for Khalil’s rhetorical representation as trauma, pain, resistance, love, and community. To better understand the significance of the word “carnation,” *Flower Meanings* argues that “The scientific name of carnation is Dianthus cariophillus. Some scientists suggest that the Latin name caranfil cariophillus…comes from the Latin words carnis, which means the flesh and refers to the original flower of pink color or incarnation, which means incarnation…” (“Carnation Flower”). To explain, although Khalil died at Carnation Street—his “body in the street like it’s an exhibit” (Thomas 25)—the symbolic meaning of “carnation” allows for Khalil to embody and become the symbol for pain, violence, trauma, resistance, love, and community. This incarnation then becomes the rhetorical element that keeps Khalil’s presence and importance visible throughout the novel and that later, helps make sense of the rhetorical choice to place his name amongst a list of real-life victims of police violence—reminding readers that although this novel is fictional, the consequences of police brutality are real and are paid in the flesh.

One of the ways in which the incarnation of Khalil is illustrated, is in the way that Starr continues to "hear" Khalil or feel his presence in crucial moments of her journey. For instance, when it is still crucial for Starr to conceal her identity as the witness, but she is being overcome by an urge to tell her school friends that she knew Khalil and witnessed what happened, she can hear Khalil tell her, "'Mind your business, Starr'" (Thomas 113). In this moment, Khalil represents resistance, keeping Starr sane as she navigates in silence through the immense pain and trauma that his death left behind. After being mad at Khalil for the possibility that he might have sold drugs, Starr finds out that the real reason Khalil sold drugs was to save his mother from a debt to the drug lord, King (Thomas 237). Beating herself up for thinking badly of him, Starr reveals, "I can hear Khalil asking me not to be mad too" (Thomas 238). In this instance, Khalil represents love and compassion, asking for empathy not just for himself but for Starr who must continue to live and carry the pain of having to witness his traumatic death. Lastly, as Starr goes on national television to give her side of the story, she feels Khalil's presence as she reminisces his sense of humor and his ability to find light in the darkness (Thomas 286). In this crucial moment in Starr's life, Khalil represents resistance, love, and community, giving Starr the strength to speak up while making her aware of the love and community that surrounds her on her journey.

To concretize Khalil's symbolic meaning as the incarnation of pain, violence, trauma, resistance, love, and community, Thomas engages in counter-storytelling and homing to portray how Carnation Street became the site of a counterpublic through Khalil's death. When Starr first encounters Carnation Street, she describes it as "where most of the houses are abandoned and half the lights are busted" (Thomas 21). But after Khalil's death, Carnation Street became the site of protest, where people came together united by pain, violence, resistance, love, and community. It is also where Starr reveals her identity as the witness and joins the crowd of protestors in their co-constructed counterpublic. This counterpublic becomes the space where they stand together against the exclusionary practices of the dominant public sphere and where they validate their experiences and make their voices heard. Carnation Street as a counterpublic, reflects Hsu's argument that the goal of homing "is not to tell a single story of resistance but to listen for, connect, and amplify a range of diverse counternarratives and to build a critical mass of…possibilities" (8). In this sense, Carnation Street becomes a site where a collection of stories and experiences collide to not only form a counterpublic but to transform pain and violence into love, resistance, and community—thus, restoring collective power to the Black community and allowing their definitions and conceptions of Blackness to triumph over the misconceptions produced by the dominant public sphere.

Angie Thomas's rhetorical choice to close out the novel with Khalil's name amongst the list of names of real-life victims of police brutality was made possible through Khalil's rhetorical function as the incarnation of community values and experiences. To bridge fiction with reality, and to ask readers to sit with the discomfort and aftermath of fictional and real-life police violence, Starr narrates:

> Once upon a time there was a hazel-eyed boy with dimples. I called him Khalil. The world called him a thug. He lived but not nearly long enough, and for the rest of my life I'll remember how he died…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 also 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.
>
> (Thomas 443)

This rhetorical move implies that *The Hate U Give* is not only about Khalil, his tragic death, and the life he lived. His name in the list with real-life victims of police brutality reminds readers that although Khalil is a fictional character, his story resembles the reality of many Black Americans in the U.S. Khalil transcends the boundaries of fiction by becoming the symbol for resistance, for trauma, for pain, for family, and for community. Khalil's name amongst the list of real-life victims allows Khalil to rhetorically function as the vessel through which narratives of police brutality, racial violence, racial trauma, and resistance are brought to the surface to model for readers the rhetorical power of counter-storytelling and homing that weave together a multitude of narratives that communicate the experiences of marginalized voices. The rhetorical power of modeling for readers the impact of counternarratives to disrupt and challenge systemic racism is best captured by Bell who states that counternarratives "have the capacity to instruct and educate, arouse participation and collective energy, insert into the public arena and validate the experiences and goals of people who have been marginalized, and model skills and strategies for…confronting racism and other forms of inequality" (72). Thomas's novel not only models for readers how to resist and challenge systemic racism and oppression, but also asks them to “sit with moments of incongruity and discomfort and to allow those feelings to open up new possibilities that seemingly distant histories and experiences might relate to our own, that we…can move closer to and make time for one another’s truths” (Hsu 4). In this way, Khalil is not just a fictional character, he is all the names on the list. He could be anyone’s son, grandson, brother, and friend. Therefore, this novel is not just a counternarrative and a counterpublic, it is a call for social activism—for readers to use their voice, experiences, and collective power for social and racial justice and to join each other in a shared experience of pain, love, and resistance.

Working simultaneously with the rhetorical effect of the real-life list of victims of police brutality, is the evocation of competing frames that Thomas captures by contrasting how Starr—and readers—saw Khalil versus how the world saw him. As Starr argues, “Once upon a time there was a hazel-eyed boy with dimples. I called him Khalil. The world called him a thug” (Thomas 443). This contrast in perspectives between the dominant public sphere, Starr, and readers allows *The Hate U Give* to function as a counterpublic, where readers join Starr, Khalil, and the Black community in their struggle for social and racial justice. While the dominant public sphere frames Khalil as a thug to erase his humanity and reduce him to racial stereotypes, Starr’s narration of Khalil and the Black community gives readers access to their private sphere to counter mainstream misconceptions about Black people—disrupting the hegemonic values upheld by dominant society. Acknowledging and emphasizing Khalil’s humanity is not only to honor Khalil’s life and the memory of him, it is to honor the lives of real-life victims, to refuse to allow the world to reduce them to a statistic in a long list of victims of police brutality, and most importantly, to deny the dominant public sphere the ability to make use of them as vessels through which to circulate their racially motivated stock stories of Black criminality, violence, and inferiority.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

The Hate U Give does more than inform and educate readers on the mechanisms of systemic racism and its severe consequences. It models for readers how the pain, trauma, and anger left behind by racial violence and social oppression can be transformed into collective power to challenge dominant society. Thomas models for readers how to create and reimagine a new space where the tyrannical conventions of the dominant public sphere no longer hold the power to physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, economically, and politically, oppress, silence, and exclude marginalized voices and their experiences. By alluding to Tupac, to Black Lives Matter protests, to the names of real-life victims of police brutality, and by evoking the carnation flower—a flower associated with incarnation and flesh—Thomas reminds readers that although this novel is fiction, it does not remain fictional and the representation of police violence and its consequences are very much real, affecting real people. Through counter-storytelling, rhetorical framing, and homing, Thomas strategically undermines the power and authority of dominant society by granting readers access to the dominant public sphere to expose how it enforces its hegemonic values to maintain white supremacy. Thomas co-constructs with readers a new counterpublic where readers join the fight for social and racial justice and where they confront the hegemonic values fed to them by dominant society. In opening the door for readers to enter the private sphere of the Black community, Thomas merges fiction with reality, allowing readers to witness and experience the racial realities of Black Americans while also modeling for readers rhetorical strategies of resistance that enable social activism.

By intertwining histories of slavery, trauma, criminalization, and racial violence with stories of love, friendship, community, resistance and activism, *The Hate U Give* is more than a herstorical narrative, a coming of (r)age story, a Black Lives Matter novel, and a counternarrative. It is a critique of, and the recalibration of the Criminal Justice System and hegemonic society in the terms and terminology of the oppressed and marginalized, who resist the language and framing of the oppressor, and refuse to be silenced and banned from the public sphere. It is the rise of a new counterpublic in the field of narratives, consisting of a collection of past non-normative histories of the marginalized with current sociocultural, economic, and political struggles interwoven with reimagined futures of freedom and racial and social justice. *The Hate U Give* is a mirror, asking every reader to self-reflect, analyze, and locate themselves within the fight for social and racial justice—a mirror that forces readers to think about the hate they give or the hate they receive, and asks them to sit with the devastating consequences of this hate. It is the reflection in the mirror, that dictates the rhetorical, social, and political power of *The Hate U Give*, maintaining its reputation and popularity as a novel highly contested because of the threat it poses to white supremacy and a counternarrative worth reading and fighting for because of its liberating and empowering rhetorical effects.

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