

The Post-Civil Rights Coming-of-Age Narrative in Contemporary African American Literature

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Abstract: For black youth in contemporary America, coming of age is fraught not only due to the struggles they already face as ethnic minorities, but the pressure that arises from living in a post-Civil Rights Movement era, where the advancements made during the mid-20th century are not always reflected in their daily reality. In this article, three contemporary novels involving teenage African-American protagonists (*Caucasia*, *The White Boy Shuffle*, and *The Hate U Give*) will be compared and examined, with a focus on the ways in which they explore the conflicts arising from living in a Post-Civil Rights era and how African-American teenagers react to the complications of racism and protest in different ways. In *Caucasia*, Birdie's biracial identity and the societies she lives in force her to constantly choose one race or the other, highlighting the focus on racial identification in the Post-Civil Rights generation. Gunnar Kaufman's experiences in *The White Boy Shuffle* illustrate the ways that both blackness and whiteness are performed and contrasted against one another, particularly through the novel's satirical tone and focus on popular culture. Angie Thomas' depiction of the gulf between lower-class black communities and upper-class white neighborhoods in *The Hate U Give* represent the issues that come with traversing both communities, resulting in a novel that argues for the enrichment of black communities and for social progress rather than worrying about mainstream white opinions on what they should do. While the novels all tackle different subjects in different fashions, they all emphasize the ways that the Civil Rights Movement impacted America and where we can go forward from here.

For Black youth in late 20th and early 21st century America, the Civil Rights Movement casts a long shadow over their maturation in terms of how they perceive themselves as African American. The movement's history and iconography have become ubiquitous across mainstream

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America. The movement's accomplishments brought about an impression that conditions for Black Americans have improved to the point that some white commentators believe there is no longer need for additional reform. However, social issues within the last decade have shattered this post-racial illusion, coinciding with a rise in coming-of-age narratives regarding Black children and teenagers in America. Examples that examine civil rights and social issues include *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas, *All-American Boys* (2015) by Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds, and John Lewis's three-volume graphic memoir *March* (2013-2016).

Historically, coming-of-age narratives by white writers have often ignored concerns relating to Black youth, potentially because "as the African American novel employs the *Bildungsroman* frame, it effects a critique of coming of age" (Raynaud 109). Due to its structure being based on white, Western norms, the coming-of-age narrative cannot center on Black lives unless it is willing to critique its own format; as such, it is not uncommon for the plight of Black youth to be ignored. In particular, the idea that a singular identity can be found through experiences and struggles is a privileged notion that is hard to inhabit for Black Americans who find their identities defined and limited by white supremacy, institutional racism, and a lack of accurate representation in the media and other areas of American society (Raynaud 106). Black writers have used the coming-of-age narrative to critique these ideas and represent how young Black people are either unable to gain this singular identity in the face of racial oppression or create their own concepts of what it means to be a Black person in America. Writers like Gunilla Theander Kester, Martin Japtok, and Geta LeSeur have written on how the Black coming-of-age highlights concerns over double consciousness, nationalism, and the cultural values that can either enhance or diminish one's identity.

As coming-of-age stories featuring Black protagonists have become more popular in recent years, they have also complicated our view of the Civil Rights Movement and created a more nuanced view of the overall narrative of African American history. In response to this complicated history and its impact on traditional narratives, this article will analyze three novels, Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017), and examine the racial and social aspects of each novel and their impact on each protagonist's maturation. I argue that consideration of these writers' depiction of Black coming-of-age in the context of the Civil Rights Movement reveals new methods of analyzing and redefining the movement's impact; these methods focus on making connections between the past and present and the power of the younger generation, to discuss current Black issues and to frame modern social activism.

The Civil Rights Movement maintains an enormous influence within both Black literature and culture; however, that influence is often portrayed in an overly simplified manner in mainstream narratives. As Christopher Metress notes in his article "Making Civil Rights Harder," the Civil Rights Movement has been reduced from a complicated series of events, people, and motivations to a straight-line narrative from segregation to freedom (138-140). This seemingly straightforward narrative has partially bolstered the idea of post-racial thinking; behind this ideology lies the hope that Black children will not have to suffer the indignities their parents and ancestors endured. This is often reflected in the idea that the Civil Rights Movement represented the American belief in "the resilience of democratic liberalism," which assisted in integrating the Black community into the broader American dream and was able to "make real the promise of democracy" (Metress 141; King qtd. In Metress 142). However, fears of violence and racism have not disappeared, but rather amplified due to a rise in racism and violent events in recent years,

such as the killing of unarmed Black men, an increase in the public presence of white supremacists, and politicians both voicing their distaste for people from marginalized communities and enacting legislation against said communities. As academics Mollie Godfrey and Vershawn Ashanti Young noted,

[T]he tension between our antiracist commitment to race as a social construct-borne out of our resistance to the scientific racism of the past-comes into direct conflict with our concern about white appropriations and exploitations of black culture and black people-borne out of our resistance to the long-standing operation of white privilege and power... It is at the borders of racial identity... that strong declarations about race, racism, and racial belonging can be both broken and made. (13-16)

The disavowal of racial boundaries in modern American society has only intensified the argument and concerns that people have over racial identification. In these historical, political, and social contexts, the effects of the Civil Rights Movement are currently being evaluated as to how they operate within today's society and how individual Black people, particularly youth, can respond to this history. This change can also be viewed in the ways that African American literature has shifted from the time of the Civil Rights Movement to the contemporary period. In the 1950s and 1960s, African American literature was entering a period where ideas of humanism and community were emphasized, connecting the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement with the literary move towards increasingly philosophical writing compared to the generation prior: "Thus, the novel became grounded within an apex of ideas about culture and cultural transmission and served up notions of human possibility" (Graham 2). While Post-Civil Rights African American

literature shares some of these characteristics, there is a vital emphasis placed on the ways that racism has impacted every corner of American society and how the ideal of a seemingly post-racial society is destroyed by the existence of white supremacy and institutional discrimination. In the face of continued tragedies and frustrations, the African American coming-of-age narrative becomes a place of reckoning and questioning what, if anything, one can do to change the world around them.

The coming-of-age narrative for Black youth is often defined by moments of education wherein the protagonist learns to understand racism's impact on their life and how they either overcome systemic racism or fall victim to it: "How can one own one's destiny – be self-determined – when one does not own oneself and faces an irrevocable loss?" (Raynaud 106). Protagonists of Black coming-of-age narratives are driven by both external and internal forces to create a self that is authentic and able to exist in a broader society. Regarding the Civil Rights Movement's influence, Black coming-of-age narratives of the last three decades often balance the individual concerns of the protagonists with the broader concerns for racial progress and social mobility; for example, Anthony Grooms' novel *Bombingham* (2001) depicts the main character's involvement in both civil rights activities in Birmingham and the Vietnam War, showcasing how these historical moments influenced the mindsets of ordinary people (Metress 140-141). The impact of the fight for African American rights throughout the 20th century is also seen in the fact that African American coming-of-age narratives, particularly those with male protagonists, focus on raising the reader's consciousness and creating a desire for activism and change in society: "[These] protagonists all grow from innocence into knowledge and the realities of the American perception of its slave descendants and communities of color" (LeSeur 99). Gender dynamics also play an important part in this representation of civil rights; as LeSeur wrote, while male-centered

African American coming-of-age narratives are more explicit in their political narratives, their female-centered counterparts are more about the everyday struggles of Black people and how the systems they encounter are more oppressive than hopeful (101-102). These political tendencies are also noted by Martin Japtok in *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction*, particularly regarding how the African American coming-of-age narrative can be used to demonstrate concerns of nationalism and how Black people should or should not fit into broader American society.

The civil rights efforts of the mid-20th century are still seen as vital regarding African American history, but as the Civil Rights Movement moves from living memory to history, its influence on contemporary Black coming-of-age narratives and its particular notion of protest and change become increasingly distant. New generations of Black youth can use civil rights models to help communicate their difficulties and create their own future in a modern society. Regarding this issue, post-soul literature might serve as a new vehicle to demonstrate the issues and concerns facing Black youth today; post-soul narratives utilize a variety of genres and tones to illustrate the lives of Black people who exist in a transitory moment between the clear segregation of the past and the supposed integration of the present, a liminal space where Black culture is only one of several cultures fighting for social respectability (Ashe 612-616). Post-soul literature also aligns with the concerns of the African American coming-of-age narrative in that it rejects the idea of a singular narrative defining all Black people. Instead, it focuses on the complications that come about from differing cultural ideas existing in one space and of mixing different ethnic and class-based artistic forms into a collage that reflects the vitality of life.

As such, this article will focus on how new directions of writing in Black literature and the impacts of the Civil Rights Movement intersect with three ideologically diverse contemporary

novels depicting the Black protagonists' coming-of-age: Danzy Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia*, Paul Beatty's 1996 satire *The White Boy Shuffle*, and Angie Thomas' 2017 Young Adult novel *The Hate U Give*. These novels represent a new consideration of what the movement means for younger generations and how lessons learned from that era might help solve some of the issues facing Black youth and society today.

The first section of this article focuses on *Caucasia*'s depiction of the Post-Civil Rights era, how mixed-race identities bleed into the movement, and how the protagonist, Birdie, negotiates her intersectional identity. The second examines *The White Boy Shuffle*'s more satirical take on hip hop culture and Black power and the equal criticism both the Civil Rights generation and structural racism receive in the novel, showcasing Beatty's cynicism towards any attempt at racial progress and the ideology of racial idealism that often dominates discussions of civil rights. The third is concerned with *The Hate U Give*, its connections with a post-Obama America, and how the political growth of its main character, Starr Carter, allows the audience to feel a bloodied optimism. The order of these sections helps to showcase an evolution in thinking about the Civil Rights Movement based on the books' internal timeline in comparison to one another; *Caucasia*'s ambivalence in the 1970s and 1980s turns into *Shuffle*'s 1990s-based cynicism and scorn, ultimately cycling back into the new 21st century understanding of civil rights represented in *Hate*.

“Black Like Me, A Mixed Girl”: *Caucasia*

Previous research on Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* has laid the groundwork for analyzing this novel, both through a critical racial lens and its historical context. For instance, Michele Elam analyzed how Jewishness interacts with the interracial aspects of *Caucasia* in her book *The Souls*

of *Mixed Folk*. In Geneva Cobb Moore's article, "*Caucasia's* Migrating Bodies," she explores how the novel metaphorically portrays the long narrative of Black life in America, while Teresa Botelho's article, "Performing Selves in 'Post-Soul' Literature: Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*," examines how *Caucasia* fits into post-soul literature and the broader genre of passing literature. While there has been previous research on analyzing the novel as a *Bildungsroman*,¹ there has been limited analysis of the intersections between Senna's treatment of race and the Civil Rights Movement and how *Caucasia* functions as a coming-of-age narrative. This section will analyze the novel's depictions of race and the historical context of its narrative to argue that Senna is focused on creating a realistic coming-of-age journey for her protagonist, one that involves both the lessons of the past and the possibilities of the future.

Caucasia is the most straightforward coming-of-age narrative of these three novels, focusing on Birdie Lee, a young girl born to a Black father and white mother, her relationship with her darker-skinned sister Cole, and her difficulties growing up in the 1970s and 1980s with her mixed-race heritage and being forced to go on the run with her mother after her parents are caught up in an FBI investigation. The traditional view of the Civil Rights Movement one would expect in a novel so temporally close to these events, however, is absent from the section where Birdie tells the story of her parents falling in love, perhaps due to the time gap between those events and the book's 1998 publication. Birdie describes the context of their meeting as such: "[My mother] had no particular interest in Negroes at this time... Just a sense that they were a mysterious race..." (Senna 33-34). For Birdie's mother, Sandy, the Civil Rights Movement is more of an escape from her stifling existence in white middle-class New England rather than a cause to which one can devote one's life.

The overall narrative of the book focuses more on the aftereffects of the militant Black Power movement rather than the mainstream Civil Rights Movement. It is also noteworthy that *Caucasia* takes place not in the Southern hotbed of the Civil Rights Movement, but in New England, particularly Boston and New Hampshire, which went through its own traumatic period of social change during this time. As such, Senna's focus is not so much on the Civil Rights Movement itself, but how it impacted the Black community, especially in terms of mixed-race individuals and their relationship with various racial communities. Previous literature involving the "tragic mulatto," a trope of the mixed-race person trying to exist in a racist society yet failing, often romanticized the plight of the characters involved, focusing more on the drama of existing in two separate worlds rather than the realities of what it means to be biracial in a society that cannot accept such a notion. In her article on *Caucasia*, Kathryn Rummell describes how previous generations of African American writers viewed the protagonists of passing novels:

Perhaps because of the [Harlem] Renaissance's emphasis on racial pride and solidarity, these novels of passing often indict the passers, portraying them as so-called tragic mulattoes or racial sellouts... These portrayals highlight the racialized social structure of the early twentieth century: mixed-race individuals often felt trapped in a society that recognized only two racial identities: white and black. (1)

Senna makes sure to not treat Birdie's life in such a fashion, instead framing it as her coming into herself and her body and choosing her racial identity rather than letting outside parties choose it.

The portrayal of the Black Power movement in the novel is notable in how it forces Birdie to examine her self-perception during her most formative years. The scenes involving Deck,

Birdie's father and the primary representative of Black Power in the novel, present a Black world that deals with as many binaries as the white society Deck opposes. As much as Deck wants to belong to the Black Power movement, he feels isolated due to his marriage with a white woman and her bourgeois status, an issue that causes Deck to make statements such as, "You're a Harvard girl at heart... And I need to... [f]ind me a strong black woman..." (Senna 25). In this landscape, Birdie's presence represents a complication in racial belonging as a mixed-race child who has more opportunities than previous generations could have achieved. However, she struggles to believe in this range of opportunities, paradoxically, due to the Black power beliefs of her father, particularly the concept that being Black is beautiful (contrasting with her embodied experience as a child who appears white). This deconstruction of Black Power ideals is part of *Caucasia's* complicated analysis of Blackness as a statement of identity, demonstrating what happens when one believes there is only one singular way to be Black rather than embracing the malleability of racial identification. Birdie's identity conflict also illustrates the concerns of the female subject in Kester's "narrative of *Bildung*," particularly those who create fractures within the community. However, as it will be noted at the end of this section, the fractures that Birdie creates and encounters also provide her with a way out and forward into a new identity. For now, the danger of Black Power in Birdie's context is that it does not present an environment where she can exist as herself, as someone whose racial identity is defined by her own beliefs, not those of another person. It is only after she has left childhood that she is able to come to terms with this ideology and what it means for her.

This disconnect between a conception of one's identity and how others perceive it also occurs in Birdie's education, as she is challenged for not properly belonging in a Black space. While attending the Nkrumah School (a school that is based on Black Power ideals) in Boston, she

encounters the opposite of the system inverse to which she has been exposed, wherein whiteness is seen as something detrimental to a person's identity and results in her being bullied by the other students: "A boy threw a spitball... He hissed, 'What you doin' in this school? You white?'" (Senna 43). Her white appearance creates issues because she looks not-Black, making her the Other within this environment, a problem that Birdie is only able to avoid when she starts acting more "Black" with the help of her sister, Cole, whose darker skin makes her quickly popular at the school. As Botelho noted regarding this section of the novel, "[t]he racial pride ethos that pervades the school and every lesson does not, nevertheless, feel alien to Birdie, linking her to a tradition she desperately wants to claim" (88). Here, Senna makes clear how the racial hierarchies of America, rather than being removed by the Civil Rights Movement, have instead been replicated by the Black community, the darkness of one's skin being the social determining factor. In this context, it is understandable that Birdie becomes focused on ways in which she can pass as Black or white in these respective communities; as Elam describes performing race while passing, "ambiguity cannot be treated as a transhistorical or positivist given; it is an attribution resulting from an acquired and variable interpretive competency" (99). Birdie's racial identity is always changing not only because of her own shifting mentality, but also because of the different communities she inhabits. Throughout the novel, Birdie finds herself in the aftermath of a Civil Rights Movement that is still leaving its mark on society. It is only when Birdie frees herself from the perceptions of others that she begins to find solace.

Birdie's time in New Hampshire still involves her questioning herself, but this questioning is due to ethnic representations rather than the racial issues she faced when she was living in Boston. She is passing as Jewish in New Hampshire due to her mother's interest in Judaism, "appealing because it unites, not because it differentiates" (Elam 115). While her fake ethnicity is

not referenced often by her peers, those infrequent mentions include negative connotations and Jewish stereotypes, such as greediness and a shifty nature: “I looked up. He was still smiling at me, but his face was half-curved into a sneer. ‘Fuckin’ kike. I’m talkin’ to you. Do you want another penny?’” (Senna 246). No matter who Birdie poses as, the communities in which she exists find reasons to mistreat her. At the same time, hiding her true identity by passing as Jewish prevents her from truly reconciling the seemingly warring aspects of herself. At one point, with news of a Black student coming to her school, Birdie thinks to herself: “My grandmother in Boston used to say that ‘the Negroes should stop obsessing about race...’ But I was finding that in New Hampshire, the white folks needed no prompting” (Senna 248). The true threats to her identity come not from herself but from the critical voices surrounding her. Whether as bi-racial Birdie or Jewish Jesse, Birdie constantly finds herself in a liminal space within American society.

Birdie’s racial identification is also impacted by which family members surround her and the specific ideals they represent. Early in the novel, as a child, Birdie is reminded how different she looks from her father when police officers in a Boston park believe he has kidnapped her: “I felt sick and a little dizzy... I wondered what my sister would do. I figured she wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place, and that fact somehow depressed me” (Senna 61). This encounter leaves her with an uncertainty about how she fits into her family from an early age while also providing her a sense on how the world will view her. Later on, after she leaves her mother behind in New Hampshire and heads back to Boston, Birdie spends time with her grandmother, who wants to mold her into the perfect “white” girl, but Birdie rejects this idea: “My grandmother had always loved me more than my sister. Or maybe it wasn’t me she loved, but rather my face, my skin, my hair, and my bones, because they resembled her own...” (Senna 365-366). If the aforementioned encounter with the police officers represents a more aggressive version of how society affects how

she conceives her own identity, the interactions with her grandmother shed light on Birdie's internal conflict over her racial identification. In order to find herself, Birdie has to move away from both sides of the racial binary. Despite the supposed benefits the Civil Rights Movement brought about for the Black community, it has done little to help those who feel trapped between both worlds. The coming-of-age for bi-racial children is built upon creating a new path for themselves rather than relying on the traditions of past generations regarding separating the races.

Birdie's journey of racial exploration is not just one of appearance, but of gaining knowledge about the world, a kind of post-soul *Bildungsroman* that questions whether she can create her own meaning in regard to her life and her identity. In particular, Birdie's search for how she identifies herself in contrast to the rest of the world aligns with how Ashe saw post-soul writers, their views of the "sometimes-real, sometimes-imagined freedom" gained after civil rights, and their examination of how to answer "What now?" after civil rights has "supposedly" triumphed (619). The beginning of the novel focuses on the images that Birdie uses to understand herself in comparison to others, most notably on how she believes that she has her sister's skin tone: "Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister... That face was me and I was that face and that was how the story went" (Senna 5). Over the first part of the novel, though, Birdie learns how differently society will see her as compared to her sister. The constructed language, Elemenno, which she and Cole create as children, represents a purity of ideology regarding the self and identity that is slowly stripped away as she begins to understand how others will perceive her throughout her life. The invention of a new language, one that is unknowable to almost anyone else in the world, is part of Birdie's attempts to find a frame of reference for how she wants to identify herself and her relationship to the rest of the world. However, this language is still shared with someone who is not her and, by the end of the novel, has gone through drastically different life experiences; this

makes them unable to return to that symbiotic bond of the past. Both of them have experienced their own moments of education that is integral to the Black coming-of-age narrative, but, as opposed to the intimacy that the audience has received from Birdie's narration, it is impossible for either sister to truly understand what happened to the other during their time apart. Ultimately, each sister creates an identity based on who they want to be that allows each of them to thrive and succeed in life; however, due to the reader's limited information on Cole's time in Brazil and the differing experiences they might have received based on their skin tones, it is unclear how much control Black girls, including these two characters, have over their identity

Caucasia not only functions as a coming of age for Birdie but as an examination of the role of migration for African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights era. Moore notes that the novel operates as a postmodern neo-slave narrative with the family on the run from authorities that wish to punish the bodies of those who step outside the racial boundaries set up by those in power. What the Post-Civil Rights era adds to the idea of migration is the dissonance between the values people hold about the places to which they travel and what those places actually are. Birdie and her mother's migration mimics the movement in slave narratives from the South towards the North and Canada, towards the freedom to be safe in one's body. However, the fact that they stop at New Hampshire where they still never gain freedom from racial inequalities illustrates that Birdie's mother may not have the same perceptions and worries about race as Birdie. While Cole and Deck's move to Brazil entails the possibility of finding a more racially holistic way of life, Cole later reveals that that was not the case: "But over those first few months in Rio, it had slowly dawned on them that the poor people living in the favellas resembled Africans, the rich people in power resembled Europeans, and everyone in the middle was obsessed with where they and their children would fall on the spectrum of color" (Senna 406). While Birdie's move back to Boston

and eventually to California to reclaim the family that she has lost, it also serves to showcase the different tasks migration can accomplish for African Americans, not only in finding the freedom that society has denied them but in reaffirming the values and bonds previously taken away from them by society.

Birdie's journey of self-discovery also involves her analyzing the relationships between herself and her parents. As she is on the run with her mother for most of the novel, the reader is given the most privilege regarding this relationship and it is framed in a more positive fashion compared to Deck's remoteness towards his lighter-skinned daughter: "Cole was my father's special one... She was his prodigy – his young, gifted, and black" (Senna 55). This line is important not only because of the reference to playwright Lorraine Hansberry, but because it is another example of the way Deck fetishizes Blackness to the point of erasing Birdie from his lineage due to her appearance. When Birdie is running away from New Hampshire, she wonders about the similarities between her and her mother in how they handle their struggles: "I wondered if my mother had felt that way... when she left Boston that morning in the dim dawn air, knowing she wouldn't see her mother, her child, her husband, for many years to come..." (Senna 289). However, as much as Birdie wishes to feel loved by her mother, her mixed-race status means she lies outside her mother's experiences. This is amplified by Sandy attempting to distance Birdie from her Black heritage during their time as fugitives: "And I could see the decision [to pretend to be Jewish] had been made already. Those other options... floated away, untapped resources" (Senna 130). The possibility of racial integration which Birdie and her mother could represent is constantly undermined by her mother's desires to reject aspects of Birdie's identity; for Sandy, "regardless of [her] specific situation, her whiteness bolsters her success" (Enlow 15). Birdie's bond with her mother is ultimately negatively affected by her mother's paranoia regarding the

world and how people will view them. She is unable, or perhaps refuses to inherit her mother's ideologies about life and race due to an inherent disconnect between their experiences and the beliefs they hold about racial identity.

Birdie's experiences with her father represent a different response to the Civil Rights Movement, one that emphasizes how Black Power can harm those who fall outside its ideology. As mentioned earlier, Deck's complicated relationship with his interracial children ultimately proves to be disastrous for Birdie, as Birdie believes she must choose between her dual identities, between the ability to pass as white and the possibility of fully embracing her Blackness. Towards the end of the novel, when Birdie has reunited with her father in California, Deck describes his academic and philosophical pursuits regarding race, but these investigations appear faulty the more he explains them in relation to the idea of the canary in the coal mine: "My father said that... mulattos had historically been the gauge of how poisonous American race relations were" (Senna 393). As much as he wants to make race a non-factor in his and his daughters' lives, the ideologies of Black inferiority left over from before civil rights prevent racial identity from fading away in some people's minds. Deck is unable to see his daughters as existing outside of the racial structures that have been previously established. The break from both parents that Birdie undergoes as part of her coming-of-age narrative is heightened by how she complicates her parents' ideologies on race and how she represents a new way forward in regard to the place of race in America.

Birdie's parents are not the only people who influence her racial identity construction, as Cole proves to be the most influential participant in this endeavor. As mentioned earlier, Birdie initially views Cole as a mirror of her own racial identity; while Cole is absent for the middle portion of the novel, her presence is still felt in Birdie's mind. At the end of the novel, when Birdie finally meets up with her sister again, she is forced to realize Cole has gone on her own journey,

the two sisters different enough that there is no longer the need to recognize one's self completely in another person: "I had believed all along that Cole was all I needed to feel complete. Now I wondered if completion wasn't overrated" (Senna 406). This realization reveals how Birdie and Cole's generation can represent the future of race and activism simply by existing. This relationship between Birdie and Cole, one that is transformative in terms of cultural identity, is a fundamental part of *Caucasia's* post-soul "journey [with Blackness], 'passing' through different cities and spaces and identities" until the people involved are able to come to terms with who they are and where they want to go (Ashe 615). In addition, the relationship between Birdie and Cole echoes Japtok's reading of Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bum* (1928). For Angela in Fauset's novel, Japtok notes, "the decision to pass is connected to [her] relationship with her mother [and] the return to ethnicity and the relationship to a sibling... are equally entwined..." (96). However, what makes Birdie's connection to Cole different from previous African American coming-of-age narratives is that Birdie's return does not entail a return to previous ways of identifying herself, whether as Birdie the light-skinned Black girl in Boston or Jessie the Jewish girl in New Hampshire. What Birdie learns from reuniting with Cole is that accepting your racial identity means you cannot go back to outdated racial identifications.

Race is not the only aspect of Birdie's identity that is fluid and exploratory throughout the novel, as Birdie also experiments with alternative forms of sexuality. In contrast to others' perceptions of her, Birdie thinks back to her time at a lesbian commune and her encounters with another girl: "At Aurora, when I was with Alexis, everything beyond us became the generic outside. And we had become the inside, where I had wanted to be" (Senna 220). As Rummell notes, Birdie's passing in the novel is not just regarding her racial identity, but also her gender and sexuality; she must pretend to be straight to pass in her community, just as much as she needs to

pass as Jewish. Even if not directly acknowledged, the social movements for other minorities, such as queer people, are confronted through Birdie's exploration of herself and her place in the world. Through these experiences, Birdie no longer exists as one person in terms of her race, ethnicity, or sexuality, but as an intersectional combination of all her experiences, identities, and personality traits.

Overall, Birdie's narrative of racial identity and transformation follows the form of a travel narrative, her innocence in Boston shattered after heading to New Hampshire and settling in Berkeley to seek a new self. In the end, Birdie heads out west, the new frontier of California representing an idea that is ever shifting yet something more livable than her past. Her journey showcases a transformation from an outcast in a fractured society to the representation of a new way forward, one that incorporates all viewpoints. Kester recognized the strength and power of the Black female subject who was made an outsider, noting "that, if acknowledged, the perspective of these abandoned voices could transform and strengthen the whole community" (74). Birdie's racial identity is one of flux and uncertainty, yet possesses the ability to adapt to any circumstances and to find ways for future generations to reach their own ideals, as suggested by her fleeting glance towards the girl on the bus at the end of the novel. No matter how Birdie views herself or where she ends up, her journey is reminiscent of the generation that came before her and their search for an identity that belonged to them.

"I'm Becoming So Black It's a Shame": *The White Boy Shuffle*

Similar to Birdie's struggles when forced to choose between her white and Black identities, Gunnar Kaufman, the protagonist of Paul Beatty's satirical novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, is

defined by his inability to fit into one culture, as the novel indicts both white supremacy and the Civil Rights Movement for complicating Gunnar's life. In Roberta Wolfson's article on race leadership in Beatty's fiction, she notes that "[t]he narrative of black exceptionalism functions as yet another antiblack structure by drawing public attention to a few exceptional black figures in order to justify the oppression of the black majority" (621). The fetishization of civil rights figures by white America has overshadowed the issues that still haunt many Black people living under white supremacy today, while the appropriation of hip hop and general Black urban culture has limited the opportunities for authentic cultural expression in mainstream spaces.

Beatty's novel, which follows Gunnar Kaufman as a child and young man, facing the issues and difficulties surrounding his neighborhood, education, artistic efforts, and racial identification, fits into this interrogation by asking how a modern day "race man" would act if he was torn between white respectability and Black authenticity. As Christian Ravela notes, "*Shuffle* offers alternative racial subjectivities to post-civil rights US racial common sense by highlighting racialized social and historical experiences beyond and below the horizon of the US nation-state as a reminder of the alternative global geographies of race" (29). This alternative presentation helps to deconstruct the traditional Black coming-of-age narrative by providing a wider political lens for Gunnar to examine why a mass suicide of people of color is, in his mind, the best way to deal with American racism rather than perhaps a more conventional ending of either assimilating into broader American society or maintaining one's Black identity in the face of oppression and racism. The current research on *White Boy Shuffle* focuses on the satirical representation of Black cultural politics. Wolfson and Ravela's articles both detail Beatty's deconstruction of traditional Black leadership and its limitations in contemporary America. The portrayal of masculinity in the novel is another popular research topic, with articles by L.H. Stallings and Vincent Kenny-Cincotta

analyzing the stereotyped depictions of Black masculinity Beatty utilizes to illustrate the issues plaguing Black men today. This article will add onto these discussions by looking at how Gunnar's maturation and ultimate destruction of Black America is reflective of Beatty's cynicism towards the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

The major target of satire in Beatty's novel is Black people and culture being misused within both mainstream white society and the Black community itself. These cultural dynamics and appropriations play into Gunnar's journey by giving him opportunities to detail the conflicting views of Blackness within his life. His father, an officer in the LAPD, is part of a lineage of Black thought that believes assimilation into white society is the best course for Black people to advance, yet the way he is treated by his white colleagues makes it clear how little respect they have for him: "His fellow officers would stand around cluttered desks breaking themselves up by telling how-many-niggers-does-it-take jokes, pounding each other on the back and looking over their broad shoulders to see if me and Daddy were laughing. Daddy always was" (Beatty 9). The dream of the Civil Rights Movement is a dream that Beatty finds inherently flawed due to the continued existence of white supremacy. Gunnar's lineage of "coons, Uncle Toms, and faithful boogedy-boogedy retainers" (Beatty 5) prepares him for growing up in a society that gives nominal value to the idea of multiculturalism while still mistreating people of color and constantly blaming them for shortcomings caused by racist structures.

Beatty is not so blind as to limit his critiques to more assimilationist factions of Black society; most of his novel is dedicated to issues that still haunt Black people today: redlining, police brutality, and seemingly liberal multiculturalism. In the beginning of the novel, Gunnar and his family live in Santa Monica, surrounded by affluence. However, after his mother realizes her children are not receiving a level of authentic Blackness in their upbringing, she moves them to

Hillside, a neighborhood that literalizes the practice of redlining, a practice the Civil Rights Movement exposed and demanded should be eradicated: “In the late 1960s, after the bloody but little known I’m-Tired-of-the-White-Man-Fuckin’-With-Us-and-Whatnot riots, the city decided to pave over the neighboring mountainside, surrounding the community with a great concrete wall that spans its entire curved perimeter save for an arched gateway at the southwest entrance” (Beatty 45). Throughout the twentieth century, African American literature has confronted the issues of Black people living in complex urban spaces. From Richard Wright and Chester Himes to Gwendolyn Brooks and August Wilson, writers illustrated the particular ways that white supremacy creates a burden on Black urban dwellers and the anonymity that becomes both heightened and reduced when one is non-white. Los Angeles in the 1990s, where the novel takes place and where Beatty wrote *Shuffle*, was a culturally and politically critical location for Black people, the site of both the birth of gangsta rap and the 1992 riots after the police assault of Rodney King, of the first Black mayor of a large American city, and of a police department that often brutalized and harassed the Black population of South Central Los Angeles. In her essay about the history of Black politics in Los Angeles, Susan Anderson describes the South Central Black mindset as follows:

Rapper Ice Cube asked, in the sound track of the film *Boyz N the Hood*, ‘How to survive in South Central?’ A generation of residents have asked the same, as manufacturing shut down, working families fled, crack invaded, migration increased, and the government safety net was yanked out from under thousands. In April 1992 [after the riots], the country (as it is prone to do with irresistible black popular expression), found itself rapping, too: Indeed, how to survive in South Central? (359)

In this Post-Civil Rights environment of social inequality and widespread injustice, the issue for Gunnar is that the aftereffects of redlining and other economic forms of racism limit the possibilities of success for Black youths; even with his intelligence, Gunnar needs to be a figure of Black exceptionalism in order to achieve the typical success of a white man. The depiction of redlining and the overall physical/social structures of white supremacy help to “highlight the challenge faced by Black people of achieving true liberation within a white supremacist framework” (Wolfson 624), a challenge for which *Shuffle* believes there may be no answer.

Physical violence is a regular occurrence for Gunnar once he reaches Hillside, yet his greatest fear is not gangs but the LAPD. Soon after his move to Hillside, Gunnar is visited by two LAPD officers performing a mockery of community outreach, while they are, in fact, are only concerned with Gunnar’s possible gang affiliations. Later on, when Gunnar’s father finds he was involved in a robbery of a vault during the 1992 riots, he beats his son bloody, as Gunnar’s description of the violence suggests: “Something had smacked the side of my neck, sending my tongue rolling out of my mouth like a party favor” (Beatty 138). Gunnar’s relationship with his father had been depicted as distant beforehand, but the aforementioned beating demonstrates how the criminal justice system can dehumanize the people within it. Throughout the novel, Gunnar’s interactions with the police, including his father as a representative of that system, illustrate how difficult it can be to trust any system when the ones meant to “Protect and Serve” instead harass and assault its minority citizens.

Beatty’s portrayal of multiculturalism provides some of his most scolding rebukes towards the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement as he demonstrates why simple culture mixing will never achieve true equality. The second chapter of the novel in particular criticizes color-blind thinking

at Gunnar's elementary school, which alternates between "classroom multiculturalism, which reduced race, sexual orientation, and gender to inconsequence, and schoolyard multiculturalism, where the kids who knew the most Polack, queer, and farmer's daughter jokes ruled" (Beatty 28). This kind of performative multiculturalism advocated by the white characters in the novel is indicative of those who believed racism against Black people was over once the Civil Rights Movement "concluded" in the mid-1960s. With his multicultural upbringing, Gunnar's coming-of-age is just as muddled as the cultural signals he is receiving. While Gunnar does gain some insights into the broader world from his education, this insecure identity ultimately leaves him with an incompleteness that is never resolved.

Black culture, in the setting of Beatty's novel, is defined more so by outside forces than within the community itself, its control usurped by commercialization for a white audience. For instance, Gunnar's friend Nick Scoby is primarily recognized for his ability to play basketball in a way that feels preternatural: "I rounded the corner onto Sherbourne Drive and realized what Scoby's rep was for: he never missed" (Beatty 94). However, paradoxically, due to his race, Scoby's full talents can never be fully appreciated by white people due to underlying white supremacist beliefs: "They would be a lot better off if they simply called Scoby a god and left it at that, but no way they'll proclaim a skinny black man God" (Beatty 192). The psychological turmoil that Scoby undergoes, both in basketball and his daily life, culminates in his suicide, which shows how alienated he felt with his success and race, more disembodied presence than living person: "[Gunnar,] there's a cloudbank floating this way. Dude, I can see the halo around my head, but I'm no angel. I'm ghost, the afterlife is just a lay-up away" (Beatty 206-207). Scoby's achievements are always limited and framed by the fact that he is a Black man living in America.

Hip hop and poetry operate on two ends of a spectrum of consuming Black art within the novel. By utilizing a satirical version of a traditional *Bildungsroman*, Beatty is able to critique how Black art has been represented in the media and how it has become a site for appropriation. A prominent example of this gap is the gangsta rap music video being filmed in Gunnar's neighborhood: "Carloads of sybaritic rappers and hired concubines cruised down the street in ghetto palanquins, mint condition 1964 Impala lowriders, reciting their lyrics and leaning into the camera with gnarled intimidating scowls" (Beatty 76-77). Even though this event is taking place in "the hood," the minstrel-like actions of the performers afterwards make clear that Black artists are not making art primarily for their community but for gawking outsiders and to enrich those already in power,

'Cut!'

The curled lips snapped back into watermelon grins like fleshy rubber bands. 'How was that, massa? Menacing enough fo' ya?'

'You got them pissing their pants in Peoria. Now one more take, and this time make sure they defecate their dungarees in Dubuque.'

Our local councilman, Pete 'Hush Money' Brocklington, walked past my house wringing his hands and bragging to the passersby about the loads of money pouring into the neighborhood coffers. I only saw the bulge in his pocket. (Beatty 77)

Whatever cultural authenticity rap and hip hop culture had in the Black community has been lost, in Beatty's mind, to the demands of capitalism and the focus on white consumption as the norm of the market. As Natalie Kalich notes regarding the making of the music video, "By glamorizing

the violence and poverty of the ghetto, the rap artists do not call attention to the problems of the ghetto in order to effect social change but instead make it ghetto-fabulous...” (82); the mainstreaming of hip hop plays out as exporting a certain view of Black society that is still acceptable to a broader white audience.

In both contrast and comparison, poetry is an art form often viewed as more sophisticated and respectable, yet just as prone to presenting a false front. During his time at Boston University, Gunnar has to deal with several well-meaning white people who view him as being protected by his artistic status, notably during his nude stroll across campus: “[T]he campus police closed in on me. I heard [the professor] shout, ‘It’s okay, he’s a poet. Matter of fact, the best black... the best poet writing today.’ The cops instantly backed off” (Beatty 180). However, the professor’s verbal gap between “black” and “poet” illustrates the gap Gunnar must bridge if he is to become a successful poet. For both forms of Black art, their authenticity is hidden behind the wall of white gatekeeping and the desire to control their impact on a broader society. Gunnar’s journey allows him to release the true power of Black creativity, even if it results in the annihilation of Black people due to society being unwilling to accept them.

As much as Beatty destabilizes the iconography of the Civil Rights Movement and American Blackness by satirizing them, he also does so by introducing other racial identities, notably Asian, as a way to defy and ultimately destroy the thin lines that have been created between racial groups by racist ideals. The inclusion of Gunnar’s Japanese mail order bride, Yoshiko, suggests that communities of color find it difficult to interact with each other authentically despite their similarities, such as during Gunnar’s wedding, when the language barrier is treated more comedically than seriously. Yoshiko’s interactions with the other characters in the narrative is one that operates at a distance, as she is not fully a part of the society around her, yet still forced to

interact with that society. However, the inclusion of these Asian elements in Beatty's typical style, along with the characters being self-reflexive about these stereotypes, indicates Gunnar's awareness of how Asians play into the stereotypes given to them for their own gain just as much as the Black characters do in the novel:

Yoshiko didn't flinch; she just bowed and said something in a terse Japanese. Veronica froze.

'What she say, Gunnar?'

'She said that if you persist with your puerile inner-city antics, she gonna take out her samurai sword, invoke her ancestral clan of warriors, and chop you into a Negro roll, inside out with salmon roe.'

'You don't speak Japanese. How you know that's what she said?'

'Why you ask then, shit? Maybe she said, 'If I act like I know some karate, I can scare these stupid niggers senseless. They sure don't act like they do on television.' Or maybe she was admiring your hair.'" (167)

The contrast between the seriousness of Yoshiko and her language and the flippancy with which everyone else treats the situation allows Beatty to include references to Japanese culture without making them seem irritating, and showcase how other cultures can fit into the world of the narrative. Gunnar's former antagonist and eventual close friend, the Latino gang leader Psycho Loco, provides another example of coalition that focuses on perceptions of manhood and how those perceptions can often limit expressions of love and emotion. While Loco is initially hostile towards Gunnar when he first moves to Hillside, he eventually warms up to him and considers him

a friend in his own odd way, bringing Gunnar along for activities his gang carries out, including the vault heist during the 1992 riots that leads to Gunnar being assaulted by the police. Surprisingly to Gunnar, Loco shows both a deep philosophical mind behind his gangbanger persona and a vast well of emotion towards those that he cares about. Most importantly, Loco sometimes acts like a surrogate father towards Gunnar, replacing the malignant neglectfulness of Gunnar's own father with a bizarre and unnerving yet genuine affection, whether by finding Gunnar a wife or helping to take care of his family at the end of the novel: "[Psycho Loco] began to take a strange interest in my personal life. What did I plan to do with my future, what size family did I want, did I believe in corporal punishment for my kids" (Beatty 142). While Gunnar's narrative emphasizes the African American aspects of American life, it also displays how the increasing globalization of the world allows young people to become aware of outside influences and thus use them as a way to create their own culture and movements.

Ultimately, though, Gunnar's story presents the most cynical take on maturation, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black life in America, of the three novels in this article. His proclamations of a mass Black suicide as a way to "abandon this sinking ship America" (Beatty 225) illustrate a greater problem than a general dissatisfaction with how America treats its Black citizens. Beatty's disdain for the methods used to dull and neutralize the Civil Rights Movement in America is clear in the novel's shift from a more comedic and outwardly cynical start to a downward spiral of self-harm, depression, and cynicism. LeSeur noted that African American coming-of-age narratives "suggest that young Black boys must confront Black history painfully and realistically" and that they must come to terms with the indignities of a racist society (100); however, Beatty makes it clear that the society that currently exists for Black America is not only harmful but corrupt beyond all repair. In the mind of Gunnar Kaufman, assimilation means nothing if white people see no

reason to open their arms: “What am I willing to die for? The day when white people treat me with respect and see my life as equally valuable to theirs? No, I ain’t willing to die for that...” (Beatty 200). The danger of the society Gunnar lives in is not so much the racism he faces but the apathy towards racism everyone has and the belief that nothing can change the situation but an apocalyptic event. Compared to Birdie’s hopeful move forward, in *The White Boy Shuffle*, the coming-of-age narrative finds itself coming to a sudden stop.

“We’ll Rebuild”: *The Hate U Give*

Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* is deeply concerned with the dangers Black youth must navigate in Post-Civil Rights America; however, the rise of a new form of protest indicates the novel’s temporal location in a post-Obama era and its impact on the Black community. The 2008 election of America’s first Black president did not result in a new post-racial society; instead, it revealed issues that had plagued the Black community for decades and were conveniently ignored by mainstream society. Thomas’ depiction of Mississippi allows for an extension of the previous Civil Rights Movement through a narrative about the protagonist Starr Carter’s attempts to understand the white and Black communities around her after her childhood friend, Khalil, is shot and killed by a white police officer. In *Hate*, Thomas reveals how this generation is trying to find a more effective strategy for fighting injustice. Notably, Starr’s story avoids the type of gendered tragedy that LeSeur discusses in her chapter on female African American coming-of-age narratives; rather, Starr takes on the traditionally masculine journey of becoming politically aware and gaining a strong sense of what it means to be Black in America. This section represents part

of the first wave of research to look at the novel, using a similar focus to the previous section by looking at *Hate*'s cultural politics and Starr's coming-of-age narrative of racial progress.

Of the teenagers at the center of these three novels, Starr Carter most clearly exhibits the signs of double consciousness as she straddles her Black community and the white school she attends. She explicitly divides her two selves and follows the different rules expected both in her local community and Williamson, the private school she attends: "Williamson Starr doesn't use slang, if a rapper would say it, she doesn't say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her 'hood'" (Thomas 74). Thomas roots Starr's fears of ostracization in her inability to interact with Black culture while around white people; the color-blind line of thinking has only made it harder for Starr to express herself for not wanting to attract attention to her Blackness. However, this concern with the performance of race helps Starr to become the most politically active protagonist across the three novels, as she finds herself in a place where she can use her voice to speak for those who cannot: "But this isn't about how Khalil died. It's about the fact that he lived. His life mattered. Khalil lived!" (Thomas 406-407). Starr embraces the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement in a way that is both aware of the past and responding to the modern Black community.

Starr's emotional journey is buoyed by several factors that were pushed to the forefront of the national consciousness at the time of the novel's release, most notably the spotlight on police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement, as the movement's ideology is central to the book's depiction of Starr's maturation. Starr's perspective on the shooting of her friend allows for a clear journey from feeling like an outsider in her community to becoming fully integrated in a movement for her people: "Yet I think it'll change one day... Why? Because there will always be someone ready to fight... People are realizing and shouting and marching and demanding..."

(Thomas 437). Considering contemporary society through the lens of the past may prevent others from recognizing injustices that still occur due to racism, prejudice, and systemic issues, and instead incorrectly relegate issues to individuals and their personal flaws. While Starr initially views Khalil's death as a personal tragedy, she remembers her father's ideology regarding the power of Black lives: "Daddy believes in Black Jesus but follows the Black Panthers' Ten-Point Program more than the Ten Commandments" (Thomas 35). Starr moves Khalil's shooting beyond the personal effects it had on her and his family and considers how it represents all the problems that have been placed upon her community. Thomas' recognition of how group mobilization and political action can help reveal and fight back against these injustices is represented by Starr's coming-of-awareness regarding her role in the community.

As opposed to *The White Boy Shuffle*, which treated police brutality as only one of its concerns, *Hate* places the issue at the center as Starr negotiates her relationship with the police, both broadly and individually. The policeman who shoots and kills Khalil is only identified through his badge number, a dehumanizing act that portrays him as part of a broader system: Throughout the rest of the novel, the police are portrayed as faceless parts of a larger system that does little to protect the Black community from criminals and instead harasses them, although Starr's uncle is shown as an example of a good policeman who, as loyal as he is to his fellow officers, is still willing to critique those parts of his force he finds troubling. Thomas' portrayal of the police and their effects on the Black neighborhood they patrol illustrate why people like Starr would be both afraid to speak up in fear of their lives and demand justice for the wrongs they have suffered. The one deviation from this characterization comes from Starr's uncle, Carlos, and his complicated place in both familial and workplace structures. As a police officer, he encounters distrust and suspicion from his family as he represents a system that continually targets them, yet

Carlos is shown to be capable of acting independently from the system and is protective towards Starr and his family. Thomas' portrayal of police brutality and police in general reflects both the understanding of well-meaning police officers and the need for change in the system as a whole.

This dual thinking is also represented in the dynamic between Starr's father, Maverick, and her uncle Carlos, who in their own ways reenact the Civil Rights era dynamic between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Maverick keeps pictures of Malcolm X and Huey Newton in his home and store, converts to the Nation of Islam while in prison (similar to Malcolm X himself), and makes sure his children can recite parts of the Black Panthers Ten-Point program on cue; he presents himself as someone who wants his children to be ready for a white society that creates systems that destroy Black people: "When I was twelve, my parents had two talks with me... The [second] talk was about what to do if a cop stopped me. Momma fussed and told Daddy I was too young for that. He argued that I wasn't too young to get arrested or shot" (Thomas 20). Starr's thoughts and actions demonstrate her agreement with Maverick's philosophy on several occasions, making it clear that she cannot fully support any system that is not a part of her community. At the same time, she finds herself disagreeing with the more aggressive aspects of his philosophy and is more interested in trying to fix the system than starting a new one altogether. Connecting with that thought, Carlos prefers to work within the system as a police officer and change it from within, even though that opens himself up to criticism from those within his community. However, Thomas shows the flaws within this style of thinking as Carlos is ultimately presented as someone who finds his belief in his fellow officers and the system he works for broken, to the point that he risks his career in order to resolve a personal issue. The purpose of this reenactment of Civil Rights era dynamics is to showcase Starr as an embodiment of a synthesis of these approaches as she

develops an ideology that focuses on changing such harmful systems in a way that creates a better future for all of those who are disenfranchised.

Another threat to Starr's community that haunts the novel is the gang culture present in her neighborhood, both in person and in the mindsets created as a result of its presence. The main danger it creates is in the problematic nature of speaking out, an idea that connects to both Starr's school life and navigating the aftermath of Khalil's shooting. Starr constantly finds herself forced to be silent not only to protect herself and her family, but because she is afraid of her identity being invalidated if she voices something others do not wish to hear. This fear becomes manifest whenever King, the kingpin of the area and a former associate of Starr's father, makes threats and inflicts violence against those who speak out against him. Notably, it is a figure from the civil rights era and its ideology that makes the clearest argument against letting fear rule oneself. Mr. Lewis, who owns the store next to Maverick's and often harkens back to the civil rights era, snitches against King live on television; when Maverick tries to tell Mr. Lewis how foolish he was for snitching, Mr. Lewis rebukes him for still thinking in the gang mindset: "Hell, I get you. Walking around here, claiming you ain't a gangster no more... but still following all'a that 'don't snitch' mess. And you teaching them kids the same thing, ain't you? King still controlling your dumb ass, and you too stupid to realize it" (Thomas 191). This moment helps Starr to find her own voice during an interview and speak out against King and what he represents: "But then I look at the camera, suddenly aware that millions of people will watch this in a few days. King may be one of them... Khalil would defend me. I should defend him" (Thomas 283). By the end of the novel, while King's arrest will not change the neighborhood overnight, it helps show that a less destructive and more social mindset can become a reality.

While she acknowledges the troubles existing in the contemporary Black community, Thomas portrays a positive view of the community spirit that Starr grew up in, one that is supportive of her and allows her to recognize the right decisions to make for those within her social sphere. Early chapters spend a great amount of time making the reader familiar with the different stores of the area and the philosophy behind the people who own them, such as the local restaurant owner: “But see, Mr. Reuben could know about Kenya’s fight and would offer her pound cake regardless. He’s nice like that. He gives kids free meals if they bring in their report cards. If it’s a good one, he’ll make a copy and put it on the ‘All-Star Wall’ If it’s bad, as long as they own up to it and promise to do better, he’ll still give them a meal” (Thomas 46). Believing in everyone within the community and supporting those who are unable to support themselves is a critical part of the ideology espoused in the novel, even for those who may not seem deserving of assistance. When Khalil’s mother, a long-time drug addict who left him in the care of his grandmother, acts despondent over his death, the interaction between Starr and her mother makes it clear that care is not something that goes away simply because of a person’s actions:

Everything I wanted to say in the waiting room comes bubbling out. ‘How come she gets to be upset? She wasn’t there for Khalil... Why does she get to cry now?’

‘Starr, please.’

‘She hasn’t acted like a mom to him! Now all of a sudden, he’s her baby? It’s bullshit!’

Momma smacks the counter, and I jump. ‘Shut up!’ she screams. She turns around, tears streaking her face. ‘That wasn’t some li’l friend of hers. That was her son, you hear me? Her son... She carried that boy, birthed that boy. And you have no right to judge her.’ (91-92)

This spirit of assistance continues until the very end of the novel, as the last image is the community helping to clean up Maverick's burnt down storefront and Starr recognizing the deep well of connections that have formed amongst her neighborhood. As opposed to the system outside of her community that has no interest in supporting her, Starr does everything she can to make sure that the people around her are given the love and help they need.

While Khalil is only seen alive for a few scenes in the opening chapters of the book before being killed and afterwards referenced and viewed in flashbacks, Thomas lays out his own coming-of-age narrative that challenges the respectability politics of the Post-Civil Rights era and showcases how humanity can be given back to those who have died. Throughout the novel, institutions outside of Starr's neighborhood, such as the police and the media, place great emphasis on Khalil dealing drugs, as if that justified his being murdered even though he was not a threat to the officer who killed him. However, it is made clear that he was doing so in order to help his ailing grandmother and pay off a debt his mother incurred: "'He didn't want to sell drugs, Starr,' DeVante says... 'Look, his momma stole some shit from King. King wanted her dead. Khalil found out and started selling to pay the debt... That's the only reason he started doing that shit. Trying to save her'" (237). Khalil's life, as much as the reader learns from other characters and Starr's memories, is one that focused on dealing with hard choices in a realistic manner, more so than Starr, Birdie, or Gunnar. By emphasizing his connections to those that he loved and the ways in which his community mourns him, Thomas is able to remove the anonymous nature of his death that might have been present in real life, and instead create a flawed yet empathetic figure that illustrates how damaging both police misconduct towards African Americans and institutional racism have been to the Black community.

The influences of hip-hop culture are used frequently in the novel to indicate Starr's state of mind in her communities. Starr is able to use music not only to regain herself when she feels lost, but also to build bridges with others. In that vein, the novel title's inspiration, Tupac Shakur's tattoo stating "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody," provides a bleak foreshadowing for Starr's journey throughout the novel; the ones who must fight the war on racism are not the adults who teach hatred, but the Black infants who grew up with racism and now must fight for justice and equality. However, a discussion with her father about the meaning behind this tattoo provides another path: "Everybody's pissed 'cause One-Fifteen hasn't been charged... but also because he's not the first one to do something like this and get away with it... So I guess the system's still giving hate, and everybody's still getting fucked?" Daddy laughs... "Yeah... that's the key. It's gotta change" (169). Through the conversations between Starr and her father, the reader is given an insight into the weight of racial memory and trauma as a source of strength that can be used to inspire one to move further and demand change for a greater community.

Social media, particularly Tumblr, is used throughout the novel as a way to help the characters communicate issues, both minor and major, and to tap into a zeitgeist of activism that may be uncomfortable to enact in reality. In their article "#Ferguson," Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa note that the rise of Black Lives Matter and other recent forms of civil rights activism gained their support on social media. The aspects of social media that lend themselves to activism include the ability to quickly spread news and create communities, to provide alternative narratives to state-sponsored reports, and to efficiently connect ideas and events from the past to the present moment. At the beginning of the novel, Starr, much like decisions in the other aspects of her life, is conflicted over whether she wants to keep her Tumblr casual and open to everyone

or actively bring issues to light. Early on in the novel, Starr brings up how she and Chris first met each other over sharing media related to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, indicating the possibilities of connection accessible via social media that were not available for previous generations. However, Tumblr also serves as a possibility for a rift in relationships, as Starr finds herself estranged from her white friend Hailey after she posts a picture of Emmett Till's body on Tumblr: "I thought it was because she couldn't believe someone would do that to a kid. No. She couldn't believe I would reblog such an awful picture... Tumblr is supposed to be sacred ground where our friendship is cemented. Unfollowing me is the same as saying 'I don't like you anymore'" (Thomas 77-78). The intersection between civil rights and social media comes to the forefront when Starr creates a page posting pictures of Khalil, trying to present the Khalil that she knew in her life rather than the thug and drug dealer he is presented as on the news. While there are those that feel that activism on social media could become a replacement for real world activism, Bonilla and Rosa note how the former can be used to bolster those actions taken offline and act as an additional method against racism and prejudice:

Whereas, in face-to-face interactions, racialized young people... might not be able to contest the meanings ascribed to their bodies (or impede the deadly violence exerted on them by the police), through their creative reinterpretations on social media, they are able to rematerialize their bodies in alternative ways. With these creative acts, they seek to document, contest, and ultimately transform their quotidian experiences by simultaneously asserting the fundamental value and the particularity of their embodiment both on- and off-line. (9)

By utilizing this vehicle of communication and community-building to call attention to injustice, Thomas illustrates the power that the younger generations hold when it comes to matters of civil rights.

By the end of the novel, a surreal optimism pervades the characters; even when justice did not prevail for Khalil and the neighborhood is still scarred from the riots, there is hope contained within the last words before the novel's epilogue: "We'll rebuild" (Thomas 436). Starr's coming-of-age results in an understanding of how she functions in her multiple societies and how she wants to be viewed by others, by not rejecting one part of herself or another, instead finding ways to combine them into one Starr. By participating in this new form of civil rights and social activism, Starr is able to bring everything full circle from previous generations, representing her people in a way that is fresh and relevant to modern concerns. For her generation, civil rights are no longer about fighting the institutions that kept them down, but about changing the negative social ideologies that still exist today.

Conclusion

Protests in recent years surrounding the deaths of Black people and the overall recognition of still-present racial structural issues have created a new movement in America that is marching forward towards progress, facing challenges and obstacles just as the Civil Rights Movement endured. As with previous movements, Black youth and other youth of color are the forefront; however, the methods of protesting and the overall tone are different. As Bonilla and Rosa note in their article, it is now easier and more efficient to engage people around the world into a united coalition willing to challenge inequality due to social media. In addition, the activism of the

moment has changed from focusing on strict legal segregation, as the Civil Rights Movement did, to issues of systemic and cultural racism and discrimination, such as police brutality, housing issues, and media misperceptions that create false realities, which are all problems these three novels confront. While there are clear differences between the current Black Lives Matter movement and its affiliates and the “classical” Civil Rights Movement in terms of their protest aesthetics, both emphasize the need to improve conditions not only for Black people living during their respective movements, but also for the generations to come.

However, it is not only the historical and contemporary events that are vital to analyzing and understanding current issues and topics, but the cultural texts and materials that provide an alternative framework of analyzing these events. As noted throughout this article, the journeys of these three novels’ protagonists can help to reveal truths about how America currently sees its racial issues and what methods can be utilized to tackle these topics. The three novels used for this article, along with many others, can serve the purpose of showcasing how this new version of social activism came to be and how the lessons learned by the young protagonists can assist in the maturation of this still-growing movement. Birdie’s trials in *Caucasia* illustrate not only the frustrations felt by mixed-race youth, but the dangers of societies that fail to move beyond binary thinking regarding race and people. The tragedy of Gunnar Kaufmann criticizes a nation that consumes the identities of its underclass while treating their pleas for help as an act of war. Starr Carter’s rise to action is an example not only of a new generation of writers tackling civil rights issues, but of characters who are just as influential and important as the real-life people fighting on the streets. Most importantly, the stories of these three characters showcase the dissonance between received notions of the Civil Rights Movements and their ideology and how those movements and their aftereffects were experienced by people in real time through their

complicated, personal experiences. By “making civil rights harder” (Metress), we can critically interrogate how the movement is viewed today and recover the lost truths and hardships that have been buried.

In a similar vein, Claudine Raynaud notes that “Coming of age is the necessary transposition of an impossible progress, the creation of a self for an African American subject against the threats of schizophrenia and annihilation” (119). Each of these novels’ protagonists are forced to navigate this complicated journey of Black maturation by analyzing the cultures and people who are incapable of recognizing social inequalities and the changes needed to improve the status of racial politics in America. The trajectories presented in these novels should not be considered the totality of young Black experiences in America, but rather a few examples of tackling contemporary Black issues and ideas regarding the Civil Rights Movement within African American coming of age narratives. Overall, these novels do more than present stories about Black youths and their upbringing; they create a new outlook on the world that is fluid in terms of identity and tinged with hope.

¹ See Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk* and Dennihy, “Talking the Talk.”

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