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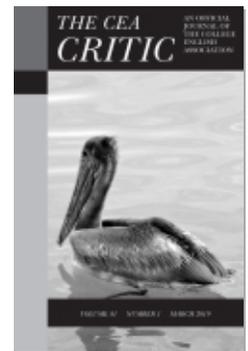
"I swear those things are so fresh": Sneakers, Race, and
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“I swear those things are so fresh”: Sneakers, Race, and Mobility in *The Hate U Give*

In March of 2018, Mark Conditt, a white man, terrorized Austin, Texas, with sporadic bombings that targeted African Americans and killed two people. While the act of bombing is itself deeply troubling, it also unearths the racial politics of the Deep South. Austin’s mayor, Steve Adler, explained the historically racist infrastructure of Austin, noting, “The Negro district was intentionally created by the Austin City Council to force Negroes and Mexicans who lived in other parts of Austin to move to the Negro district. . . . And the effects are apparent in the racial and economic disparities found in East Austin today” (qtd. in *New York Times*). Austin is not the only city with a color line. Greensboro, North Carolina, where the 1960 sit-ins occurred, is another. Just behind the campus of my university, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, is Gate City BLVD. This street segregates Greensboro into halves. The economic disparities on either side of the line highlight the implicit racism at the level of city planners and local government.

My purpose here is to contextualize and contemporize the issues of racial urban infrastructures at the center of Angie Thomas’ 2017 young adult novel *The Hate U Give*. The novel centers around Starr Carter, whose best friend, Khalil, is shot by a police officer in front of her. In the weeks that follow the traumatic event, Starr learns to navigate her different worlds through a lens of both race and class. While she lives in Garden Heights, a predominantly poor, black neighborhood, she attends a rich, mostly white private high school called Williamson Prep. Herein lies one of the novel’s central tensions; since the two worlds Starr inhabits are in a sense opposite, she must split herself to function in each one. Garden Heights Starr is at home in the black, poor community; Williamson Starr is amid the multitude of rich, white peers. To do so, the protagonist uses sneakers to cross realms, so to speak, allowing the shoes to act as material representations of the social and racial boundaries she traverses daily. I wish to analyze how Starr uses sneakers to cross these lines between her school and home. In the novel, Thomas confronts the racist institutions that determine color lines and implements specifically black cultural symbols and capital to serve as foils to the racist ideologies and hierarchies at the heart of Starr’s community. Key among these symbols are sneakers.

In discussing the racial divide regarding sneakers for *The Atlantic*, Emily Chertoff analyzes Nike's Air Jordans as "the body (and athletic talent, and *the self- and net worth*) of [Michael] Jordan. He who wears the sneakers can Be Like Mike" . Particularly interesting to me is the desire of material and monetary wealth in relation to wearing the sneakers; that is, the cultural capital of sneakers, and Jordans in particular, offers an appearance of wealth. This idea pairs well with the motif of sneakers in *The Hate U Give*. Starr finds a sense of identity by collecting, maintaining, and wearing Jordans, and she notices Jordans on her peers and notes the monetary worth or cultural capital the shoes carry. This emphasis on the monetary and cultural weight of sneakers throughout the novel brings to light Starr's recognition of economic status and class. Focusing on sneakers allows readers to understand that Thomas engages with the cultural significance of the sneaker in the black community to create an authentic setting in Garden Heights, a city that stands in for the many Southern cities that face the same violence we see in the novel.

Early in *The Hate U Give*, while at a party, Starr's friend Kenya says to her, "'You act like you don't know nobody 'cause you go to that school'" (4). Starr's Garden Heights friends ostracize her for attending "that school" and the protagonist fails to respond. When Kenya calls her out for attending Williamson Prep, Starr eschews the comment and mentally sticks up for herself by commenting, in part, on her shoes: "My Jordans are comfortable, and damn, they're new" (5). In doing so, the reader learns how Starr's shoes establish her identity as a girl who navigates between white and black cultures—someone who code switches to negotiate to her diametrically opposite environments. The narrator asserts, "Williamson Starr doesn't use slang—if a rapper would say it, she does not say it, even if her white friends do. . . . Williamson Starr is nonconfrontational. Basically, Williamson Starr does not give anyone a reason to call her ghetto" (71). While her code switching and subsequent transformation into "Williamson Starr" allow the protagonist to subtly blend in, her shoes, on the other hand, help her stand out:

I sling my backpack over my shoulder. As usual it matches my J's, the blue-and-black Elevens like Jordan wore in *Space Jam*. I worked at the store a month to buy them. I hate dressing like everybody else, but *The Fresh Prince* taught me something. See, Will always wore his school uniform jacket inside out so he could be different. I can't wear my uniform inside out, but I can make sure my sneakers are always dope and my backpack always matches them. (71)

Influenced by *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, Starr thus maintains part of her black identity in a white environment in the creative pairing of her shoes—a symbol for physical movement from her home to school—and her backpack—a symbol for her educational growth and success. Important to note

is that Starr worked for the shoes herself, allowing herself a role in creating her black identity. At the same time, she earned the shoes working at her father's store. Inextricably tying her labor to the acquisition of her shoes elaborates on Starr's difference as a young, black, working woman unlike her friends at Williamson who do not work for the money they spend.

Starr's financial situation differs from her friends' in other ways. She lives in the disenfranchised, marginalized, racialized section of town. Her position on the other side of the color line influences not only her access to capital but also to the identity she inscribes on the goods she buys. Thomas discusses the disparities between Starr and her classmates in an interview with *NPR*, explaining,

But there's Williamson Starr who does not speak about where she's from. And it comes from a small place of shame, but it's also a place of trying to fit in because she's in a school where it's mostly white and it's mostly upper class. She has classmates who are driving Benzes ... whereas she's dropped off every morning. So she has to try to figure out who she is where she is. And once this unfortunate event happens in her life, the struggle becomes even harder.

The class distinction between Starr and her friends warrants examination, for it motivates not only Starr's decisions but the narrative drive. For example, the class disparity between Starr and Chris, her white boyfriend, reifies the conscious effort the Starr takes in walking the color and class line in Garden Heights. Starr's descriptions of Chris's house indicate that she conflates economic status with what determines a "home." Thomas writes, "Most of Chris's house looks too fancy to live in. Statues, oil paintings, chandeliers. A museum more than a home. Chris's suite on the third floor is more normal looking. . . . I pull my Timbs off and grab the remote from his nightstand. As I throw myself onto his bed, I flick the TV on" (374). The "normalcy" of Chris's room allows the Starr to be more comfortable, indicated by her ease in removing her shoes. Timbs, furthermore, figure largely in popular black culture. In the video for his diss track "Hit 'Em Up", Tupac dons the classic brown shoes as he raps about both violence in the black community and the contentious rap game in the 90s. For Tupac, the Timbs, much like Jordans, embellish his persona: he is rich and successful, but, most importantly, he is powerful, dominating the rap genre. In Thomas' novel, Timbs come off as a sign of comfort and equality. If Jordans allow Starr to cross racial lines and to function in both black and white spaces, the removal of the shoes in Chris's bedroom cue vulnerability. Chris's family's wealth is painfully obvious and is the antithesis to Starr's poverty, and she uses the financial discrepancy as justification to end their relationship. She tells him, "'My old house in Garden Heights could fit in your house'" (375) and "'I grew up in the projects'" (376). Rife with the language of economic and monetary difference, these rationales for breaking up identify Starr's

self-consciousness around white people, specifically those with whom she attends school. This discrepancy between Starr and Chris is rooted in not only race but also economic and social difference. It is when Starr is “Lying in his California King-size bed in his suite in his gigantic house” that she realizes what she considers “the truth” (375, emphasis added). The string of similarly structured, repetitive prepositional phrases here signal Starr’s feeling of inadequacy and difference as a poor black girl in a rich, white environment. The economic and social contrast the prepositional phrases highlight control, not only the reading of the sentence but also, metaphorically, Starr’s perception of herself. Indeed, she recognizes this difference in school, but it becomes a startlingly clear realization in Chris’s room after she removes her shoes—at a moment when she is not straddling the color and social line between blackness and whiteness. In turn, the removal of her shoes represents Starr’s vulnerability and the difficulty of managing her two personas, thus fueling her uncertainty about her own relationship with both Chris and Williamson Prep.

This uncertainty of Starr’s relationship with herself and her community is shaped by the historical trauma of violence black people face in America. As a child, Starr had two best friends: Natasha and Khalil. Natasha, the reader learns, is killed in a drive-by shooting as the trio played outside. And, of course, the police kill Khalil at the beginning of the novel. At Khalil’s funeral, Starr’s narration glimpses at an idyllic, innocent past adulterated by the perpetual violence on the other side of the color line. As the narrative surrounding Khalil’s death unfolds, Thomas uses analepsis to reify the sense of foreboding at the heart of the novel. The flashbacks to Starr’s childhood and to the exact moment of the shooting itself not only disrupts the straight chronology of *The Hate U Give*, but they also construct a window into Starr’s psyche. Looking at a picture of “The Hood Trio” on the funeral program, Starr recounts, “There are pictures of me and him from years ago and one with us and Natasha. All three of us smile, trying to look gangster with our peace signs. The Hood Trio, tighter than the inside of Voldemort’s nose. Now I’m the only one left. I close the program” (126). The elongated complex sentences lead up to a simple sentence: “Now I’m the only one left.” Thomas juxtaposes the convoluted history of violence with the simplicity of death at the sentence level. The historical trauma of police brutality and marginalized communities on the other side of the color line signifies centuries of institutionalized racism. Hence, while the context of Khalil and Natasha’s deaths is fraught with perplexing and convoluted history, the results are straightforward: death.

I want to conclude with a short analysis of the title of the novel. “The Hate U Give” is part of a larger quote from Tupac Shakur: “The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody.” This title is an acronym that spells out THUG LIFE. Thomas asserts that the acronym alludes to the oft-used descriptor of black men in society, “I really wanted people to look at young

black men in a different light. . . . And I want people to look at that word in a different way. [Tupac] explained that as meaning that what society feeds into you has a way of affecting us all. So that's a message I wanted to get across. And I wanted to tell young people that your voice matters." Tupac's credo becomes the thesis statement of the novel. The deceptive simplicity of "THUG LIFE" mirrors the plot in Thomas's book. Thomas encourages us to read beyond these simplicities to see the complexities of Starr's situation. Therefore, Khalil's death is more than a murder; it emblemizes the perpetual racism that ravages the communities on the side of the color line that suffers from racism. Starr's traversing the color line through the medium of shoes—those staple black cultural commodities—highlights a way to combat the racism. Through a harnessing of those cultural symbols, perhaps the color line that divides cities and peoples can be erased. Studying shoes in *The Hate U Give* encourages a reading that puts race relations at the forefront of the novel. Shoes come to represent the tightrope that Starr walks to maintain her two identities. Thomas uses them as a marker for both white and black communities to come together and rebuild the fractures racial violence, like the kind we have seen in Austin and elsewhere, engenders advocating for "not giving up on a better ending" (443).

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