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Nobody's Protest Novel

Novelistic Strategies of the Black Lives Matter Movement

Though the medium of the novel may seem anachronistic for a Black liberation movement founded by three queer Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi—on Twitter, the stunning blockbuster success of Angie Thomas's 2017 debut novel *The Hate U Give* represents a high-water mark for an already-rich archive of what we might label BLM novels.[1] A fictionalized representation of the precipitating events and formation of BLM, the retrospective quality of this realist novel offers an opportunity to reflect on the novelistic strategies pursued by African American novelists since the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and to interrogate which formal commitments and affective states best align with and provoke the Movement's radical imaginary. While similarities in content are evident in a survey of these novels (nearly all, for example, focalize from the perspective of young Black adults and feature violent and sometimes fatal confrontations with police officers), there is significant diversity in the novelistic strategies and forms these works undertake.[2] When measured against the now fully developed Movement for Black Lives platform, fissures between some novelistic strategies and the Movement become visible, whereas others demonstrate the potentiality of the novel to expand and animate the politics of Black liberation. More specifically, the conservative impulses I will identify in *The Hate U Give* as compared to the Movement's political objectives, in terms of race and even gender and sexuality, are embedded in the conservatism of its commitment to the historical form of literary realism.[3] In contrast, experimentations on linearity and fictionality like we see in Kiese Laymon's 2013 debut speculative novel *Long Division*, which I see as the first contribution to this growing and impressive archive, not only connects more closely to the politics of the Movement, but also offers it an aesthetic, if also dissonant, vision for Black liberation. Through a comparative analysis of *The Hate U Give*'s realist construction of empathy and *Long Division*'s speculative strategy of collective revision and queer love, this article assesses the aesthetic and political potential of novels that claim a relation to the BLM movement and outlines what different and successful forms the BLM novel can and should adopt.[4]

Told from the grief-stricken perspective of teen-aged Starr Carter who witnesses her close friend Khalil fatally shot by a white police officer, *The Hate U Give* delivers

a powerful first-person account of the impact of racial terror on a young Black woman within the conventions of literary realism. Stocked with real-life references and allusions to BLM, readers are granted unfettered access to Starr Carter's inner life as she grieves the unjust slaying of her friend, navigates between her poor, urban neighborhood in Garden Heights and a wealthy, mostly white suburban private school, and comes into her own as an activist following the inevitable and predictable acquittal of the guilty officer. The linear plot charts out a clear progression from rising action (biased criminal investigation of the guilty police officer) and climax (BLM protest compromised by violence) to a clean and uplifting resolution.

Through this structure, the novel fulfills a commonplace, transcendental view of the novel as a privileged aesthetic to produce empathy; in Guido Mazzoni's words, "its ability to make us see the world through the eyes and conscience of someone else, its ability to allow us to step into a possible life that is not ours" (55).[5] Yet, as calls for empathy have become a ritual and hollow imperative after the video documentation and circulation of the murders of unarmed Black citizens by police,[6] tracking the ways a BLM novel actually functions to produce empathy, and calling these processes into question, is crucial. *The Hate U Give* re-asserts what Saidiya V. Hartman calls the "precariousness of empathy" from 19th century accounts of racial terror, in which there becomes an "uncertain line between witness and spectator" for the reader, and demonstrates how the direction of empathy all too easily shifts away from victims and towards the perpetrators of state-sanctioned violence (4). While Starr is able to give first-person voice to her experiences with the abuses of modern US policing—the most loudly celebrated aspect of the novel—the novel uncritically reproduces narratives of black criminality and lends added credibility to the abuses themselves. In this way, her position as vocal and empowered subject resembles what Hartman calls "burdened individuality," in which her narration re-presents, "the forms of violence and domination enabled by the recognition of humanity, licensed by the invocation of rights, and justified on the grounds of liberty and freedom" (9). As I will show, the appeals for empathy figured by Starr's first-person account ultimately serve to discipline those who seek solutions deemed too "un-realistic" to oppose the "sustained violence against Black communities" ("Platform").

Published just one month before the very first appearance of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter,[7] Laymon's speculative novel offers a different novelistic strategy for Black liberation. The novel's fourteen-year-old protagonist, Citoyen ("City") Coldson, struggles to reconcile the ever-present racial violence in rural Mississippi—charted in the novel from the Ku Klux Klan's terrorism in the 1960s, the destruction and subsequent government inaction in response to Hurricane Katrina, and Trayvon Martin's then-recent death—with the so-called "post-racial" era of the Obama presidency. Attending to what Candice Jenkins refers to as the "nuances

of the local" and the specificity and significance of the US South in contemporary Black politics, the novel departs from the literary realism of *The Hate U Give*, opting instead for a fantastical narrative nonetheless realistically situated in its spatial and historical present(s) (785). In the novel's speculative conceit, City (C1) discovers and reads an embedded novel "Long Division" written by another City Coldson (C2) in 1985 who joins his potential girlfriend Shalaya Crump on a time-traveling adventure to "help [her] change the future in, I don't know dot-dot-dot a special way" (25). In this genre-bending found novel, Shalaya introduces City to a magic hole in the backwoods, where the two huddle close together and supernaturally transport to 2013 to see what their futures entail. Yet, Shalaya and City quickly learn they will need to travel backwards to 1964, locating the source of the racial habits and memories that prepared their misery not only in their historical present (1985) but prepares their misery into the future (2013).[8]

The stories of C1 and C2 converge through the character Baize Shepherd, a teenage girl from a neighboring town of Melahatchie who disappears in 2013 and emerges in the pages of C2's time travel narrative. As is ultimately revealed, she is the future daughter of Shalaya and C2. However, in the climax of the narrative, Shalaya decides to stay in 1964 to dedicate her life to changing the future, consciously erasing her daughter Baize from existence in 2013. Ultimately, Shalaya discovers that, because of the inescapability of racialized terror and white supremacy across time and space, choosing between a prospective, or even speculative, future of continued racial violence versus the future of a child she does not know is really not to have a choice at all. This tragic moment leaves C2, and C1 as the reader, mourning the literally inexplicable erasure of yet another young Black person and anticipating the desperate urgency of the phrase "Black Lives Matter" in the present.

In order to remedy this failure—of City's courtship as well as of their efforts to change the future—the novel concludes with C2 planning to travel back in time perhaps ad infinitum to secure a future where Baize can live again. Reading this story, C1 and his (romantic) rival LaVander go and huddle together in the magical hole in the woods, reading (and writing) new stories that open out from their love for each other. In the context of this struggle for liberation, City's (queer) romantic relationships recall bell hooks's insight that "love does not bring an end to difficulties, it gives us the strength to cope with difficulties in a constructive way" (xvii).[9] In the metafictional and speculative space of *Long Division*, City struggles against a novelistic world in which he is constantly figured as not mattering, unimportant, and perhaps not even "real," and in doing so provides an aesthetic strategy of collective revision and radical love in ways that not only align more closely to the political output of the BLM movement, but innervate and provoke its radical imagination.

These divergent novelistic approaches inform my hybridized title for this article. In his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin warns against novels marketed and written with the intention of functioning as political propaganda: "The 'protest' novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary" (20). *The Hate U Give*, with its emphasis on empathy and linear progress, constructs just such a compensatory narrative. Substituting "everybody" with Marc Lamont Hill's recent formulation of "Nobody" at the center of the BLM movement,[10] I see an opportunity to instead consider narratives that interrogate the contemporary and particular "nobodyness" of a Black protagonist, rather than a neat and conciliatory narrative of heroic ascent. Outlining the systemic devaluation of Black lives, Lamont Hill states, "To be Nobody is to be vulnerable . . . To be Nobody is to be subject to State violence . . . To be Nobody is to also confront systemic forms of State violence . . . To be Nobody is to be abandoned by the State . . . To be Nobody is to be considered disposable" (xviiii–xxi). If *The Hate U Give* serves as an example of "Everybody's Protest Novel," I would like to comparatively refer to *Long Division* as "Nobody's Protest Novel," which suggests a more appropriate criterion for an effective BLM novel. Through its nonlinear and metafictional narrative, *Long Division* makes demands of its readers to participate in a messy and uncertain act of collective revision and provokes a radical imaginary through its production of Black queer love.

"ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE": EMPATHY AS DISCIPLINE IN *THE HATE U GIVE*

The Hate U Give's direct evocation of the BLM movement and topical political and pop culture references has been a central feature of its appeal. This linking between the fictional and the real world spans from the novel's title, a reference to TuPac Shakur's classic "Thug Life," to its final pages, when the novel indexes the fictional Khalil among a list of real-life murdered black children, men, and women. This commitment to re-presenting "reality" is not tangential to the aesthetic and political strategy of the novel, but is its very raison d'être. For example, the listing of real-life murder victims at the novel's conclusion allows the narrative to pivot from the first-person towards the collective and collective purpose: "It would be easy to quit if it was just about me, Khalil, that night, and that cop. It's about way more than that though . . . It's also about Oscar. Aiyana. Trayvon. Rekia. Michael. Eric. Tamir. John. Ezell. Sandra. Freddie. Alton. Philando" (443). In this sense, because the "real" functionally provides the logic for both the literary production of empathy and the impetus for political solidarity, it also necessitates scrutiny about what and how novelistic realism can represent reality. What and who becomes

blurred, obliquely referred to, or erased in the invented story-world of *The Hate U Give* might tell as much about the function of empathy in the novel—to discipline BLM protesters as "unrealistic"—as what and who is actually named.

A significant case study for this dynamic between empathy and realism emerges when Starr takes on the mantle of activist and spokesperson following the officer's acquittal in the murder of her longtime friend Khalil. After wading through a swarm of riotous looters, Starr locates her personal advocate, Ms. Ofrah, with a group of protesters who are faced off against militarized riot police. Starr accepts the bullhorn, "[turns] to the cops," and beseeches them for empathy using equivocal language that is broadly characteristic of the novel: "I'm sick of this! Just like y'all think all of us are bad because of some people, we think the same about y'all. Until you give us a reason to think otherwise, we'll keep protesting" (412). Punctuating a series of debates staged throughout the narrative between Starr's father (formerly incarcerated) and Starr's uncle (a "good cop") about the difficult work of policing, this sentence crystallizes the novel's rhetorical appeal for empathy for Black victims of police brutality as a reciprocation of the empathy universally acknowledged as deserved for police officers. It is this very novelistic strategy that sets into motion the problematic climax and resolution of the novel. Against warnings from the police to disperse, Starr continues, "'Everybody wants to talk about how Khalil died . . . But this isn't about how Khalil died. It's about the fact that he lived. His life mattered. Khalil lived!' I look at the cops again. 'You hear me? Khalil lived'" (412). In the midst of a chorus of "Khalil lived" chants, the police throw a can of tear gas to forcibly disperse the crowd. Starr narrates her climactic moment of defiance and heroism as follows: "I jump off and pick up the can. Smoke whizzes out the end of it. Any second it'll combust. I scream at the top of my lungs, hoping Khalil hears me, and chuck it back at the cops. It explodes and consumes them in a cloud of tear gas. All hell breaks loose" (412–13). How Starr connects and organizes these moments, especially to what comes after, is intricately and problematically related to how the novel positions itself alongside reality.

This scene directly alludes to a flashpoint image of the then-nascent BLM movement—Robert Cohen's iconic Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of Edward Crawford (fig. 1) throwing a tear gas canister while protesting the killing of Michael Brown by officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson. All of the aspects of the image that make it arresting to behold—the intensity of the sparks, the angle and power of his stance, the American flag t-shirt, the long dreadlocks obscuring his face, and the two witnesses in the background—also make it ripe for the political act of narrativization. Detractors of the movement, of course, used the image to justify and legitimize the militant police response in Ferguson, but the novel's superficially empowering narrativization of this image is similarly problematic. Despite the novel purportedly focalizing on police brutality from the perspective of a young

FIGURE 1. *Reprinted with permission of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Photo by Robert Cohen.*

Black activist, the narrative actually disavows Edward Crawford's own account of the events captured in the image, and instead directly reproduces the Ferguson police's version of events. Worse, it was this official police account that was used not only to justify an escalation of violence against protestors in Ferguson, but also to specifically charge Crawford with assault and "interfering with a police officer," a legal quagmire and additional layer of injustice that plagued Crawford for years until his recent controversial death.

The contrast between Crawford's actual experience and the novel's problematic gesture at re-presenting this event makes visible an irreconcilable divide between novelization, reality, and the function of empathy. In the fictional scene, Starr expresses her clear intention to inflict an almost primal vengeance on the police: "I scream at the top of my lungs, hoping Khalil hears me, and chuck [the tear gas canister] back at the cops." Although her action is narratively justifiable, Starr poignantly couples the victimhood of the police with a complete breakdown of the social order: "It explodes and consumes them in a cloud of tear gas. All hell breaks loose." However, compare this scene with Crawford's own account given in a CNN interview: "Before the photo was taken, the canister . . . was shot and it landed a couple of feet away from me and some children standing on the sidewalk. [I wasn't] throwing the canister at the police; I was merely getting the canister away from me and the kids . . . I can't even throw a baseball that far, let alone a burning can of tear gas." According to Crawford, the police were unequivocally the aggressors, targeting children—ironically, as I will later discuss, this is a position that the novel will immediately reverse to further implicate and discipline Black "criminals" for not conforming to "law and order." Of course, as with any photograph, it is impossible to see what is outside the frame: who Crawford is protecting and where he

is throwing the canister are completely erased from the image, which is precisely what makes narrativization and re-presentation so crucial. His testimony suggests that not only were the police not the target of his throw, but that the canister never got close to them, never "[exploded] and [consumed] them with tear gas." By positioning Starr's action as the cause of "hell [breaking] loose," rather than an effect of the aggressive actions of an occupying militarized police force, the novel aims to demonstrate that her reaction, although deserving of empathy, is ultimately impetuous, dangerous, and in need of moderation. And yet it is precisely this figuration of empathy that suggests the limits of how the novel can imagine justice.

Appropriate to the novel's narrative framing of "reality," the mayhem following the tear gas incident gives pretext for a disgruntled gang leader to exact his revenge on Starr for bringing undue attention on him and his criminal chokehold on her neighborhood. Trapping Starr and her friends in her father's convenience store, King, the gang leader, sets the store on fire, only to have her father heroically come in and save the children from certain death at the last moment. Afterwards, police and ambulance arrive on the scene late—"Of course, that's when the cops and the fire truck decide to show up. Of course. Because that's how it works in Garden Heights" (424)—and the crucial lesson of the novel unfolds. Initiated by the shop owner next door, Starr's father and eventually everyone in the vicinity build up the courage to act as witnesses against King: "Ho-ly shit. Daddy snitched . . . And shit, now the crowd is echoing the same thing, pointing at King and his boys. I mean, everybody's snitching. The rules no fucking longer apply" (425). Here, the reader encounters a stunning inversion of the tear gas scene, in which empathy and discipline again intersect. In the first scene, Starr's reckless action causes "hell [to break] loose." While the reader empathizes with Starr in that moment, it also directly leads to the endangerment of her and her friends. In this scene, we have a moment again when "the rules no fucking longer apply." Except, here, the "rules" being breached are not linked so much with a compromised figuration of empathy, but with the novel's more straightforward image of justice. The "rules" against "snitching," in contrast to the "law and order" that framed the tear-gas scene, clearly only served the interests of the Black criminals by shutting out the police from taking punitive action against them.

Precisely for this reason, the narrative structure demonstrates unambiguous support for the breakdown of these rules, in stark contrast to the negative breakdown of law and order following Starr's moment of retaliation. The plot finds an ironic and neat resolution in the recuperation of the police's legitimacy, as they restore order to the community and save the children from the more alarming and volatile dangers of so-called "black-on-black" crime. This is not a side effect of centralizing empathy, but its very social function in the novel. Although the scene purportedly attempts to demonstrate the outcomes of an empathic disconnection

between the police and the community, it does so by reproducing a commonplace, and arguably white supremacist, framing of this concept: yes, officers need to see the world through the eyes of Black citizens, but Black citizens also need to see the world through the eyes of an analogously victimized police force. In other words, the starting point of the novel's political ideation and praxis is weakly conceptualized as each equally accepting their legitimate assessment by the other as a threat.

Taking this further, we can see the novel mark out clear borders for its empathy, which cannot and will not extend to King or "his boys," who are deservedly thrown to the ground with guns drawn on them. Starr, her family, the neighborhood, and the implied reader are elatedly cheering on while "King reaches for his car door, but some officers draw their guns and order him and his boys to the ground" (425). While Starr (and the reader) cannot find justice in how the criminal justice system deals with guilty officers, the novel re-stages the scene that opens the novel with Khalil being shot in a clear affective substitution of justice. For *The Hate U Give*, imagining any alternative forms of accountability for King's actions that are not carceral is not only outside the narrative frame, but counter to the very empathy-driven justice the novel figures. By only offering the residents of Garden Heights the option to "snitch" or not snitch, the reader is meant to see this iteration of an arrest, police with "guns pulled" and King and "his boys" face down on the cement, consigned to the alienation and systemic violence BLM recognizes as foundational to mass incarceration, as an achievable, pragmatic, and appropriate justice for the death of Khalil. Moreover, the way in which empathy and accountability flows away from King and towards the police in the novel's climax signals to the reader that the racial, economic, and social injustices that beleaguer the residents of Garden Heights throughout the novel ought to be attributed to individual agents, who can only be dealt with through incarceration, rather than a broader and more diffuse struggle against systemic and institutional racism.

One can see this individuation of social ills most directly in the novel's denouement, when images of Starr throwing the tear gas canister make her an object of media attention. Her father summarizes the coverage for Starr, saying "They calling you brave . . . But you know that one network gotta complain, saying you put them cops in danger" (435). This characterization embodies a central problem with the novel's relation to the "real." Starr's father indirectly refers to Fox News as "that one network [who] gotta complain," while the rest of the media unanimously consents to Starr's impetuous yet empathy-evoking act of bravery. However, the problem is not that the novel strangely does not name Fox News directly, despite its numerous other direct cultural and biographical references, but that it forgoes the pervasiveness of racism in America in favor of a single, out-of-touch and ultimately dismissible villain.

Yet, to look to the reality from which the novel culls its story, one can see a more

totalizing opposition to BLM activists that makes Starr's ascent seem totally fictional in comparison. Following the murder of Trayvon Martin, CNN's ostensibly moderate commentator Don Lemon hosted a 'tough-love' segment on 'black-on-black crime.' Later, he reprimanded BLM as needing to "grow up" and that they "have to start listening" after they successfully recuperated and publicized the complicit participation of the Democratic Party in advancing racist policies during the 2016 primary (Charity, n.p). Barack Obama, in a disciplinary rebuke of the movement's critiques of the Democratic Party, chided that BLM "can't just keep on yelling," and suggested "the value of social movements and activism is to get you at the table, get you in the room, and then to start trying to figure out how is this problem going to be solved" (Shear and Stack, n.p). These are but two significant examples among many of the real-life figures *The Hate U Give* might count among Starr's allies who expressed discomfort or outright dismissal of Black protestors who did not shepherd their grievances through trusted leadership and hierarchical gate-keeping institutions.

Missed by many in the political mainstream, perhaps deliberately, was the fact that the Movement for Black Lives, made up of "a collective of more than 50 organizations representing thousands of Black people from across the country," was not "just yelling," but had developed a robust, detailed platform of specific polices they believed would "solve" the problem, including progressive tax reform, stringent environmental regulations, and redistribution of public funds from prisons and policing to healthcare and employment opportunities. Rather, the rhetorical positioning of the movement as "just yelling" was itself part of a broader paternalistic strategy of disavowing the movement as "un-realistic" in their demands. The tragic effects of this are clear when we return again to the example of Edward Crawford. Three years following the tear gas canister incident, the media would finally return to Crawford to cover that he died by what was reported as a self-inflicted gunshot wound in his car, at the age of 27. After Darren Seals, 29, and DeAndre Joshua, 20, Crawford was the third prominent Ferguson protestor to have died within three years of the murder of Michael Brown. The circumstances of Crawford's death, as Kirsten West Savali of *The Root* suggests, have contributed to a growing sense of fear among some activists that this is evidence of state retaliation against those who speak out. Yet, both the conspiratorial and official accounts of his tragic death together demonstrate the intense mental and physical burden that racial violence and social activism has on African Americans.

The novel, on the other hand, seemingly cannot re-present the dissonance of Crawford's experience while simultaneously constructing a coherent, realist narrative of progress. In other words, the very critiques by so-called allies in positions of prominence, like Lemon and Obama, that BLM protestors were themselves not

"realistic" are symptomatic of a wider matrix of systematic oppression from which Ferguson protesters like Crawford, but not Starr, suffer and die. It is no accident, then, that the very blurring of these categories—victim and perpetrator, realistic and unrealistic—anticipates the imaginative stagnation that closes the novel. After adding Khalil to an invocation of real-life victims, Starr ruminates optimistically,

> Yet I think it'll change one day. How? I don't know. When? I definitely don't know. Why? Because there will always be someone ready to fight. Maybe it's my turn. Others are fighting too, even in the Garden, where sometimes it feels like there's not a lot worth fighting for. People are realizing and shouting and marching and demanding. They're not forgetting. I think that's the most important part. Khalil, I'll never forget. I'll never give up. I'll never be quiet. I promise. (443–44)

Although Starr suggests "the most important part" of political liberation is "not forgetting," this seems to be the very outcome of the novel's commitment to empathy and realism. To start, there is Starr's odd surprise that racial activists might rise "even in the Garden, where sometimes it feels like there's not a lot worth fighting for." Although class is omnipresent in the novel (Starr attends private school in the suburbs, where her family ultimately re-locates), she seems not to recognize that the violent intersection of racial and economic inequality has a direct and not coincidental relation to racial activism—the origin point of BLM was, of course, Ferguson and not a wealthy suburb. But, the notion that Starr, and by extension the movement, will continue to ascend a straight path, buoyed by the unanimous support of a liberal American populace, does not dismantle so much as contributes to, in Joseph Winters's words, "the effectiveness of power [which] depends partly on its ability to produce forgetful subjects" (Winters 7). Precisely by using the generic conventions of novelistic realism to shape the narrative with a "sense of stability, coherence, and achievement," the novel loses much of the dissonance that might allow it to imagine a way forward. Rather, the novel's vague gesture towards progress "[functions] as a consoling and conciliatory narrative," one that ironically but conveniently serves to prove the very grounds of Obama's bad faith rebuke that BLM has little concrete to offer: "How? I don't know" (Winters 7).

Exemplifying this contradictory, and forgetful, relation to the "real" is the novel's seemingly benign replacement of "Black Lives Matter" with the fictional moniker "Just Us for Justice." While this name change effectively unyokes the ideals of "liberty and justice for all" from its actual social and political praxis, this fictional moniker also demonstrates a crucial misreading of BLM. Often overlooked, the BLM movement importantly and loudly announced itself as queer affirmative, and structured its inclusive mission statement around issues of race,

class, gender and sexuality. The official mission statement of "The Movement for Black Lives" states:

> We are a collective that centers and is rooted in Black communities, but we recognize we have a shared struggle with all oppressed people; collective liberation will be a product of all of our work. We believe in elevating the experiences and leadership of the most marginalized Black people, including but not limited to those who are women, queer, trans, femmes, gender nonconforming, Muslim, formerly and currently incarcerated, cash poor and working class, disabled, undocumented, and immigrant. We are intentional about amplifying the particular experience of state and gendered violence that Black queer, trans, gender nonconforming, women and intersex people face. There can be no liberation for all Black people if we do not center and fight for those who have been marginalized. ("Platform")

The name "Just Us for Justice" not only muddies the movement's foundational relationship to these intersectional categories and "collective liberation," but also broadly erases them from the novel. Setting aside the generic heterosexual teenage romance that runs through and informs much of the novel, the very list of real-life victims that Starr indexes stops short of mentioning the often-erased slayings of trans-women of color who figure prominently on the movement's own website: Eyricka Morgan, Tamari Dominguez, Elisha Walker, Shade Schuler, Amber Monroe and Kandis Capri ("The Loud Silence When Trans Women of Color Are Killed"). Recalling that this list is precisely what allows Starr to recognize the continuity between Khalil's murder and the wider reality of state violence against Black peoples makes this omission all the more significant. Given the list's political import, this final act of forgetting must be seen as integral to the content-less moderation that the novel imagines for racial justice, and thus its almost complete separation from the "real" BLM movement.

Given all of these examples, one might counter by suggesting that *The Hate U Give* simply does not get close enough to reality in its representation of the BLM movement, and that another realist novelistic attempt could succeed where this one fails. However, this does not account for the ways in which reality conceptually and politically is wielded to bludgeon the political imaginary of Black liberation. Perhaps nothing demonstrates this fact more than when Bernie Sanders, a politician widely regarded as a "radical" progressive and who is widely chided for his own "un-realistic" policy positions, dismissed the specific BLM initiative for reparations as too "divisive" and "its likelihood . . . is nil" (Coates). Imagining communities without police as the institution is currently conceived—a de-militarized police force or even community control of police—can seem out of reach. And yet, to give shape and form to this political imaginary is precisely what the realm

of aesthetics and the novel in particular can accomplish. The first step in doing so may be to discard the idea that the novel's primary social function is empathy, which, as the example of *The Hate U Give* demonstrates, all too easily, and unintentionally, can flow towards oppressive institutions instead of oppressed communities. Instead, if we concede that the novel can benefit BLM at all, the movement needs a novel that traces out the continuities and discontinuities from history into the present, negotiates the real with the potentiality of the un-real, and enchants readers with an anti-racist, queer and trans affirming vision of the future.

"GETTING NICE WITH MYSELF LIKE A TRUE CHAMP": LOVE AND LIBERATION IN *LONG DIVISION*

Seeing the missed opportunities in Thomas's retrospective novelistic account of the BLM movement in 2017, it is illuminating to go back to what I consider the first BLM novel, and see what anticipatory novelistic strategies it utilized to provoke and animate the movement's radical political imaginary. The most obvious difference between these two novelistic strategies is *Long Division*'s non-linearity, emphasized through the recurring symbol of ellipses and its formal celebration of "backwardness," in a complete disavowal of the popular narratives of "racial progress" that so easily conform to the frame of literary realism. As the speculative conceit of the novel ultimately calls into question if the novel really has any beginning or ending, *Long Division* centers fictionality itself as a tool for Black liberation, in which collective and continuous acts of writing, reading, and revising are grounded in radical acts of Black love.

One way of understanding *Long Division* is as two, intersecting love plots. As I laid out in more detail in the introduction, one plot tells of 1985 City's (failed) courtship of Shalaya, as their (virtual) daughter Baize Shepherd is disappeared by Shalaya's act of staying in 1964. In what follows, I will focus on the parallel (queer) courtship between 2013 City (C1) and his playground rival LaVander Peeler, which I argue serves as a counterweight to this story, and how their union opens up different and new narrative possibilities for Black liberation. City's rivalry with LaVander Peeler takes center stage in the satirical "Can You Use That Word in a Sentence Contest," devised as a less racially biased version of the Scripps Spelling Bee that privileges linguistic style and dynamism over rote memorization. At the "Can You Use That Word in a Sentence" contest, both City and LaVander share the goal of individual achievement, though in different ways. While LaVander targets the reward of "$75,000 toward college tuition if they decide to go to college" to fulfill his image of personal economic uplift, City seeks more abstract, cultural capital: "Hell, LaVander Peeler can be the first African American to win the title all he wants y'all . . . But me, I'm striving to be legendary, you feel me?" (12). LaVander

fires back at City's unrealistic fantasy, "I also do feel that all your sentences rely on fakeness and magic. All things considered, I feel like there's nothing real in your sentences because you aren't real" (12). LaVander unknowingly characterizes the political and metafictional conceit that City is not actually "real," he is fictional, just a character in a book. But, he does so by drawing on a host of other permutations of "realness" at play throughout the novel, including his sexuality.

LaVander and City's academic rivalry cannot be separated from the repeated charges of backwardness, particularly sexual backwardness, each uses to lower and demean the other; for example, the opening pages are devoted to the final charge in LaVander's pejorative nickname for City, "White Homeless Fat Homosexual," and his panicked effort to disprove it. The purported source of the charge is City's failure to adhere to the arbitrary rules in the boy's bathroom put in place by LaVander, according to which the boys must say "Kindly Pause" when entering the bathroom or making eye contact lest they be accused of being gay. In fact, after he is later sent to see the school principal, City learns that these arbitrary rules are part of a wider matrix of discipline and surveillance of his sexuality that include not only LaVander but also his teachers:

> 'One more thing,' she said and closed the office door. 'I hear from LaVander Peeler and a few other teachers that you're spending a lot of time in the bathroom stalls.' I looked down at the stains on my brown Adidas. 'Have you been—' 'What?' 'Touching yourself inappropriately at lunch time?' 'Lunch time?' 'Yes. I've heard that after many of the boys go into the bathroom to yell 'Kindly pause,' that you go in there and . . . listen. We don't want to halt natural human functions at Fannie Lou Hamer, but that activity might be better suited for home, possibly before you go to sleep or maybe even when you wake up.' I raised my eyes to Principal Reeves. 'Do you understand what I'm saying, Citoyen?' 'I'm good,' I told Principal Reeves. 'You're telling me not to get nice with myself on school property. I hear you.' (18–19)

As Heather K. Love has argued, the very notion of backwardness, particularly inflected through the lens of race and sexuality, provides the binaries by which modernity defines "progress." By enacting, in Love's words, "[modernity's] techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging behind," these two teenagers reproduce the very narrative frames that will limit their political (and sexual) union in the novel. (Love 5–6) In this sense, the nonlinearity of the novel links time traveling into the past not just to reckon with the political and historical "backwardness" of rural Mississippi, but to "backwards," queer modes of desire as providing potential pathways forward for Black liberation.

Progress, fictionality, and sexuality overlap in significant ways as the contest plays out. Almost immediately upon arriving at the contest, City recognizes that he

is only present to perform the role of a character when the organizer, referring to his hairbrush, scolds him, "there will be no props beyond this point" (30). On stage, City receives his first word to use in a sentence: "niggardly." He refuses to answer their question, offering instead a brutally uncomfortable invective about his hatred of "LaBander Veeler." City plants himself in front of the microphone, ignoring pleas from the organizer and the judges to return to his seat. City's brush becomes prominent again: "I started brushing the skin on my forearm, then pointed my brush toward the light . . . I threw my brush toward the light and the buzzer kept going off" (38–39). Seeking to assert his realness, City awkwardly and disturbingly responds initially by not speaking up to power, but to degrade those he perceives as below him, not only LaVander but also the Mexican contestants on stage alongside him. But, after one embarrassed Mexican contestant comes up to the stage and kicks him in the shin, he qualifies, "What was I supposed to do?" and then makes an abrupt shift in his diatribe:

> Bet you know my name next time. And I bet you won't do this to another black boy from Mississippi. Shout out to my Jackson confidants: Toni, Jannay, Octavia, Jerome, and all my country niggas: Shay, Gunn, and even MyMy down in Melahatchie just trying to stay above water. I got y'all. President Obama, you see how they do us down here? You see? (40)

City's attempt at redemption through a "shout out" of all those similarly obscured by dominant narratives of racial progress marks the beginning of a lesson that perhaps another, more collective literary intervention is preferable politically. City's final and desperate request for Obama's help, though, echoes a deep frustration and observation that BLM activists like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor have made, "The black political establishment, led by Obama, had shown over and over again that it was not capable of the most basic task: keeping black children alive. The young people would have to do it themselves" (n.p.). Recognizing this fact, as well as developing a strategy to counter it, ultimately requires City to resolve how to embrace and love completely LaVander.

This process of sexual recognition is significantly linked to the discursive and ideological apparatuses that construct City as fictional. After his dramatic exit, City watches on television as the judges humiliate LaVander by asking him to use the word "chitterlings" in a sentence, ironically the same word LaVander ridiculed City for receiving during the qualifiers. LaVander, with "tears streaming down his face," constructs a dynamic sentence employing the correct usage of the term. Under a cascade of balloons and popguns, the "voice from behind the light" articulates the very process of historical erasure that the textual productions of *Long Division* will struggle to undo: "LaVander Peeler, you have done the unbelievable! Times are a-changing and you, you exceptional young Mississippian, are a symbol of the

American Progress. The past is the past and today can be tomorrow" (43). Echoing the central promise of a "post-racial America" after Obama's inauguration, and the compensatory function of such narratives for white Americans eager to erase the past and belong to the future only. Recognizing the false and humiliating nature of this promise, LaVander immediately backtracks on his victory, intentionally changing his response to an incorrect answer. After a brief interruption, the judges embarrassedly scramble to hand the trophy off to another contestant.

Watching LaVander's performance, City finds the inspiration to begin writing his own book, its title "All Things Considered" inspired by LaVander's catchphrase. But City's recognition that their struggle is collective overlaps with City's potentially sexual self-recognition as well:

> I turned the television off and sat on the floor of the garage with one of Mama's old brushes. I wanted to get nice with myself at the thought of something I knew. But there was too much I didn't know . . . if LaVander Peeler would be my best friend now . . . and how LaVander Peeler collected the courage to go from Fade Don't Fade to that adolescent black superhero on stage. I knew I could never hate LaVander Peeler again after that night. And crazy as it sounds, that was enough to make me feel good about . . . getting nice with myself like a true champ, and writing my story until Mama came home to tell me why what I did was wrong for me, wrong for black people yet to be born, and wrong for the globe. (45)

In this passage, City demonstrates that the relationships between racial progress and how we imagine the past, present, and future cannot be separated from the sexual politics that divided LaVander and City in the first place. City employs the familiar euphemism "getting nice with myself" that the reader first encountered in the embarrassing lecture administered by Principal Reeves. However, in this passage, City expresses none of the shame that saturates that earlier encounter. LaVander was "enough to make me feel good about . . . getting nice with myself." But, even more than a straightforward euphemism, the phrase itself "getting nice with myself" suggests as well a kind of coming to understand and accept one's own sexuality. The sensations of love and political liberation overlap and amplify each other. The scene significantly links City "getting nice with [himself] like a true champ" directly to him beginning to write what has come to be in the hands of the reader, and C2. And in this brief moment, just as City recognizes in himself an opportunity to be "nice with [himself]," he also recognizes in himself a kind of pure, unadulterated moment to write himself without or before his vision is shuttered by his mother's pending disciplinary lecture, and beating, on the merits of racial progress.

This series of scenes departs in significant ways from the tear gas scene in *The Hate U Give* and the ability for its protagonists to come into their own as activists and participants in Black liberation. Recalling Hartman's phrase, Starr's "burdened individuality" can be interpreted as lending credence to the very same "forms of violence and domination" by which she was traumatized at the novel's beginning. However, in *Long Division*, the fissures between reality and fictionality combined with the backwards and forwards movement through diegetic time and space all expose City to a speculation on race, history, and the future far more nuanced, and ambivalent, than is available to Starr. A key part of this lesson comes from reading about C2's strategy in exploiting the power of revision in bringing back in some form or fashion those erased by racial terror:

> When I got in the hole, I opened the computer. A revised version of the paragraph I'd written when I first took Baize's computer back to 1985 was on the screen . . . I reread it. And I wondered. And I wandered. And I wrote. And I reread that. And I wrote more. And I erased some lies. And I wrote more. And I erased some truth . . . And I wrote more. And the more I wrote and erased, the more I felt Baize and other characters slowly—word by word, maybe even sense by sense—coming back. (261)

By co-creating C2's magical story and sketching out the continuities between his historical present and the erased histories of racial terror in rural Mississippi and beyond, City recognizes the limits of any empathy sought or given by the organizers of the contest and the radical opportunities instead in loving LaVander. The novel concludes with C1 and LaVander Peeler re-united, huddled together in the hole in the woods, reading C2's "Long Division." City narrates,

> 'We didn't really have no other choice or no other story to tell, so we had to make one.' I waited for him to say something back but he didn't, so I looked right in his face and said what I should have found a way to say to him after the contest. 'I love you, LaVander Peeler. I do, man, and I don't care what you say about that homosexual stuff. I know you love me, too. You ain't even gotta say it . . .' (267)

In "Long Division," City witnesses the threat of the erasure of not only their stories but also their physical existence and discovers the power of fiction writing. But, he also recognizes that this fiction writing needs to embrace in both form and content the "backwardness" that defined and constricted their early relationship. The acknowledgment and articulation of radical Black queer love smoothens the surface for a new story, one that at the very least will allow for the imagination of a future that break free from damning commitments to heteronormative masculinity. Fol-

lowing this criteria (nonlinearity, revision, and love), City demonstrates that the political capacity of the novel remains crucial for Black liberation. City closes the novel,

> In that hole, right in that second, I felt as far away from Melahatchie and I felt as close to a real character as I had ever felt. And the craziest thing is that I wasn't sure if that was a good, bad, or sad thing. With LaVander Peeler's head on my shoulder, we started rereading *Long Division* from the beginning, knowing that all we needed to know about how to survive, how to live, and how to love in Mississippi was in our hands. The sentences had always been there. (267)

In this moment, the fact that City feels "as close to a real character" as he had ever felt before demonstrates a kind of power in fictionality that was foreclosed to him as he performed on-stage with a "prop" in his hands. Survival, life, and love converge in the book that they hold and in the contact of reading together, "head on shoulder." Together, with the toxicity of homophobia and masculinity stripped away, the two boys are able to begin a collective act of writing, reading, and revision that is grounded in history but imaginatively provocative. As *Long Division* suggests, novelization offers a kind of magic that makes available, like in no other medium, the reciprocal recognition and love between people of color that is necessary for liberation.

Fittingly, the final page closes with one of the novel's recurring motifs, and one that might best explain the novelistic method most appropriate for the BLM movement: an ellipsis. Baize, just before she is erased, explains this image: "The ellipsis always knows something more came before it and something more is coming after it" (245). It is this virtuality of the "more" that attracts City, as he frames the ellipsis as both an authorial and readerly intervention. City desperately asks Baize what this would mean for a book, "So you'd have pages filled with dot-dot-dot in your book?" Baize responds, "No . . . I'd have a front cover with the words 'Long Division' across the top and below 'Long Division' would be a blue-black ellipsis. We'd all be inside the book, too, with those other characters already in the book and we'd all fall in love with each other" (245). Baize's suggestion that the ellipsis be seen on the cover sends the reader to the beginnings of each edition of *Long Division* (6, 20), each bearing the mark of the ellipsis. The open-endedness of the image suggests that the "more" to come will be the opportunity for each of these characters to re-work and revise the stories until they "all fall in love with each other." This ellipsis is a marked shift from Starr's "I don't know," representing *Long Division*'s successfully substitution of an empathy-driven narrative of racial progress, with a predictable and conciliatory beginning, middle, and end, with an active and imaginative charge to the reader (and potential future BLM activist): be un-realistic in your demands for liberation, constantly re-write and revise these demands, and

always point the work towards an endpoint when "we'd all fall in love with each other."

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NOTES

1 In the week of March 17, 2017, *The Hate U Give* reached #1 on the New York Times bestseller list for Young Adult Hardcovers and was quickly optioned for a film to the highest bidder, 21st Century Fox. As of this writing, the novel has appeared on the NYT bestseller list for seventy-five weeks.

2 In addition to the novels I analyze here, see Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied Sing* (New York: Scribner, 2017); Tony Medina *I Am Alfonso Jones* (New York: Tu Books, 2017); Nic Stone, *Dear Martin* (New York: Crown Books, 2017); James Hannaham *Delicious Foods* (New York: Little Brown, 2015); T. Geronimo Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015); Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys* (New York: Atheneum, 2015); Kekla Magoon, *How It Went Down* (New York: Square Fish, 2014).

3 This article follows recent scholarship that critiques the relationships between capitalism, neoliberalism, and literary realism. See Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Clare La Berge, editors, *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Des Moines: University of Iowa Press, 2014); Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, editors, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017)

4 I thank Zahi Zalloua and the anonymous reviewers for *The Comparatist* for helping me refine and develop this thesis. I also thank the scholars at the ASAP/10 conference who asked me key questions at a crucial stage in writing this.

5 See also Liza Zunshine *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

6 See Wesley Morris, "Why Calls for a 'National Conversation' Are Futile." *The New York Times Magazine* 2 August 2016. Accessed 15 May 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/07/magazine/why-calls-for-a-national-conversation-are-futile.html.

7 *Long Division* was published on June 11, 2013. According to Pew Research Center, the first appearance of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was July 13, 2013. http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/08/15/the-hashtag-blacklivesmatter-emerges-social-activism-on-twitter/.

8 *Long Division* is among a small oeuvre of backwards-oriented time-travel novels authored by African Americans: including John Williams's Captain *Blackman* (1972) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979).

9 For more on the importance of Black love in the BLM, and the specific influence of its formulation by bell hooks, see, Patrisse Khan-Cullors. *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017); Mychal Denzel Smith *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching: A Young Black Man's Education* (New York: Nation Books, 2016); Nicole Jackson, "Black Love as Activism," *Black Perspectives*, 28 Feb. 2018. Accessed 15 May 2018. https://www.aaihs.org/black-love-as-activism/.

10 For more on the "value gap" that informs Lamont Hill's understanding of "nobodyness," see Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

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