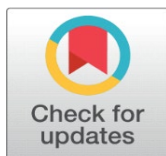


# A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF BLACK FEMALE ADOLESCENCE, IDENTITY AND RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN YA FICTION OF ANGIE THOMAS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of Black female adolescence in the young adult (YA) fiction of Angie Thomas, focusing primarily on *The Hate U Give* and *On the Come U Drawing* on Black feminist theory and intersectionality, the study explores how Thomas constructs identity, agency, and racial consciousness through her protagonists, Starr Carter and Bri Jackson. The analysis demonstrates that Thomas's narratives foreground the lived realities of systemic racism, gendered stereotypes, and class marginalization, while simultaneously offering frameworks of empowerment, voice, and resistance. The paper argues that Thomas's work contributes significantly to contemporary YA literature by centering Black female subjectivity and fostering critical racial awareness among adolescent readers.

**Keywords:** Young Adult Literature, Black Lives Matter, Ethnicity, Racial Consciousness, Adolescence, Feminism, Literary Theory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A rigorous feminist analysis of Black female adolescence in the fiction of Angie Thomas requires an integrated theoretical framework grounded in Black feminist thought and the concept of intersectionality. These frameworks provide the analytical tools necessary to understand how race, gender, class, and age interact in shaping the lived experiences of Black adolescent girls. Rather than treating identity as a singular or fixed category, this approach conceptualizes it as dynamic, relational, and structurally mediated. Black feminist theory emerged as a corrective to both mainstream (often white, middle-class) feminism and male-centered Black liberation discourses, which historically marginalized Black women's experiences. Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde have emphasized

that Black women occupy a unique epistemological position shaped by intersecting systems of oppression. Collins' concept of the "matrix of domination" is particularly useful in analyzing Thomas's work. This framework posits that power operates across multiple, interlocking domains—structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal—each contributing to the regulation of Black female bodies and identities. In the context of young adult fiction, this means that protagonists such as Starr Carter and Bri Jackson are not merely navigating adolescence but are also negotiating institutionalized racism, gendered expectations, and socio-economic constraints. Moreover, Black feminist thought foregrounds the importance of lived experience as a site of knowledge production. Rather than privileging abstract theory, it values storytelling, narrative voice, and personal testimony. This emphasis aligns closely with the narrative strategies employed by Thomas, whose first-person protagonists articulate their realities in ways that challenge dominant cultural narratives. Their voices function not only as literary devices but also as epistemic interventions that contest silencing and misrepresentation.

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a foundational lens for understanding how multiple axes of identity and oppression operate simultaneously. Crenshaw originally developed the term to critique legal and social frameworks that failed to account for the compounded discrimination faced by Black women. Intersectionality rejects additive models of oppression (e.g., racism + sexism) in favor of a more nuanced understanding of how these systems are mutually constitutive. In the context of Black female adolescence, intersectionality is particularly salient. Adolescents occupy a transitional life stage marked by identity formation, and for Black girls, this process is further complicated by racialized and gendered socialization. Thomas's characters illustrate how intersectionality operates in everyday life: Starr's need to code-switch between her neighborhood and her elite school environment, or Bri's struggle against stereotypes within educational and cultural institutions, exemplify how identity is shaped by overlapping social forces. Intersectionality also highlights the role of class and space in structuring experience. The spatial divide between marginalized urban communities and predominantly white institutions reflects broader socio-economic inequalities, reinforcing the idea that identity cannot be disentangled from material conditions. Thus, Thomas's narratives demonstrate that Black female adolescence is situated at the intersection of systemic inequities and personal development.

Within this combined framework, identity formation is understood not as an individual or purely psychological process but as deeply social and political. Black feminist and intersectional theories challenge developmental models that universalize adolescence, instead emphasizing how structural inequalities shape the possibilities available to young people. For Black adolescent girls, identity is constructed through continuous negotiation between self-definition and externally imposed labels. Stereotypes such as the "angry Black girl" or the "hyper-visible yet invisible" subject constrain how these individuals are perceived and treated. At the same time, resistance to these stereotypes becomes a crucial aspect of identity formation. Thomas's protagonists actively reinterpret and redefine their identities, illustrating the agency embedded within constraint. A key component of this theoretical framework is the emphasis on voice as a form of resistance. Black feminist scholars argue that reclaiming narrative authority is essential for challenging systems of domination. In this sense, speaking out—whether through testimony, activism, or creative expression—constitutes a political act. In Thomas's fiction, voice operates as both a thematic and structural element. The protagonists' journeys from silence or self-censorship to articulation and advocacy reflect a broader feminist trajectory of empowerment. Their voices disrupt dominant

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discourses, expose systemic injustices, and create spaces for alternative representations of Black girlhood.

Applying Black feminist and intersectional frameworks to YA literature also reveals the genre's potential as a site of critical pedagogy. By engaging with complex social issues through accessible narratives, Thomas's work fosters awareness and empathy among readers, particularly adolescents who are themselves navigating identity formation. This theoretical approach thus positions YA fiction not merely as entertainment but as a culturally significant medium that can challenge hegemonic norms and contribute to social transformation. The representation of Black female adolescence in Thomas's novels exemplifies how literature can function as both a mirror and a catalyst—reflecting lived realities while inspiring critical consciousness and resistance. By foregrounding the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and age, these theories illuminate the complexities of identity formation and the significance of voice and agency. This framework not only enhances literary analysis but also underscores the broader socio-political implications of representing marginalized identities in contemporary YA literature.

## 2. AGENCY AND VOICE

Within the feminist and intersectional framework applied to the fiction of Angie Thomas, agency is not conceived as an abstract ideal of independence but as a situated, often conflicted (contested) practice of asserting voice under conditions of structural constraint. For Black adolescent girls, whose identities are shaped by intersecting systems of racialized and gendered marginalization, voice becomes both a site of vulnerability and a powerful instrument of resistance. Thomas's narratives foreground this tension, illustrating how the act of speaking—whether through testimony or artistic expression—constitutes a transformative process of self-realization and socio-political engagement. In *The Hate U Give*, Starr Carter's trajectory from silence to articulation exemplifies the emergence of feminist agency through voice. Initially, Starr's reluctance to speak out after witnessing police violence reflects not weakness but a rational response to fear, trauma, and systemic intimidation. Her silence is shaped by multiple pressures: the threat of retaliation, the internalized need to conform within her predominantly white school environment, and the historical silencing of Black voices within legal and media institutions. From a Black feminist perspective, this silence can be understood as part of what Patricia Hill Collins identifies as the "controlled voice" of marginalized subjects—where expression is constrained by dominant power structures. Starr's early self-censorship, particularly her code-switching and emotional restraint, reflects the psychological labor required to navigate these environments. However, Starr's eventual decision to testify and publicly speak out represents a critical turning point. This shift is not merely personal but deeply political. By reclaiming her narrative, she resists the erasure and distortion of Black experiences within dominant discourse. Her voice becomes a counter-discursive force, challenging institutional narratives that criminalize Black victims and legitimize systemic violence.

This movement from silence to speech aligns with the broader feminist assertion—articulated by thinkers such as Audre Lorde—that "your silence will not protect you." In this context, empowerment is not framed as the absence of fear but as the decision to act despite it. Starr's development thus illustrates that agency emerges through the negotiation of fear, risk, and responsibility, transforming her from a passive witness into an active participant in social justice. Importantly, Thomas does not portray voice as purely individualistic. Starr's empowerment is

deeply relational, shaped by her family, community, and historical context. Her father's teachings, her mother's guidance, and the collective grief and resistance of her community all contribute to her evolving consciousness. This reflects a key principle of Black feminist thought: that agency is often communal rather than solely individual. Starr's voice, therefore, becomes representative—not in a reductive sense, but as part of a broader continuum of Black resistance. Her testimony echoes the lived realities of others who have experienced similar injustices, transforming personal narrative into collective protest. In this way, Thomas situates feminist agency within a network of social relations and shared struggle. In *On the Come Up*, Thomas expands the notion of feminist agency beyond overt political activism to include cultural and artistic production. Bri Jackson's engagement with rap music illustrates how creativity can function as a form of resistance, enabling marginalized subjects to articulate their identities and contest dominant representations. Rap, as depicted in the novel, is not merely a medium of entertainment but a historically rooted form of Black expressive culture associated with storytelling, critique, and survival. Bri's lyrics become a space where she can confront systemic inequalities, challenge stereotypes such as the "angry Black girl," and assert her own narrative authority. Through her music, she negotiates the tension between authenticity and market expectations, highlighting the commodification of Black identity within the cultural industry.

From the perspective of Black feminist theory, Bri's artistic practice aligns with the tradition of using creative expression as a tool for both self-definition and social critique. Scholars such as bell hooks emphasize that cultural production can serve as something against hegemonic representations, allowing marginalized voices to disrupt dominant ideologies. Thomas's portrayal of Bri underscores a critical expansion of feminist agency. While Starr's activism is rooted in direct political engagement, Bri's resistance operates through cultural channels. This distinction is significant because it challenges narrow definitions of agency that privilege visible, institutional forms of protest over everyday acts of expression. Bri's journey also reveals the risk inherent in creative resistance. Her rise in the rap scene exposes her to misinterpretation, exploitation, and public scrutiny, demonstrating that voice does not guarantee control over how one is perceived. Nevertheless, her persistence in shaping her narrative reflects a form of resilience that is central to Black feminist conceptions of agency. Across both novels, voice functions as a mechanism of identity formation. For Starr and Bri, speaking and creating are not merely responses to external conditions but processes through which they come to understand themselves. Their voices enable them to reconcile fragmented identities, resist imposed labels, and articulate more coherent senses of self. This emphasis on self-definition resonates with Black feminist insistence on the right to name one's own reality. In societies where Black girls are often spoken for or misrepresented, the act of claiming voice becomes an assertion of existence and autonomy.

### **3. THE CONCEPT OF SPACE AND INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY**

In the fiction of Angie Thomas, class and space are not passive backdrops but active forces that shape identity, perception, and possibility. Through carefully constructed spatial contrasts—most notably between marginalized Black neighborhoods and predominantly white, affluent institutions—Thomas foregrounds how socio-economic structures intersect with race and gender to produce complex, often contradictory subjectivities in Black adolescent girls. This spatialization of inequality reveals that identity is not only socially constructed but

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also geographically and materially situated. In *The Hate U Give*, Starr Carter inhabits two distinct worlds: her working-class neighborhood of Garden Heights and the elite, predominantly white private school she attends. These spaces are not merely different in demographic composition; they are structured by unequal distributions of wealth, power, and cultural capital. Garden Heights is marked by economic marginalization but also by community solidarity and cultural familiarity, whereas the private school represents institutional privilege alongside racial isolation and subtle forms of exclusion. This spatial duality produces what can be described as a bifurcated identity. Starr must constantly negotiate how she presents herself in each environment, engaging in code-switching not only linguistically but also behaviorally and emotionally. Her “school self” is deliberately restrained—avoiding slang, suppressing anger, and minimizing any behavior that might confirm racial stereotypes—while her “home self” allows for greater authenticity and cultural expression.

From the perspective of intersectional theory, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, this duality illustrates how structural inequalities are lived through everyday practices of self-regulation. Starr’s identity is not fragmented arbitrarily; it is shaped by the need to navigate spaces governed by different norms, expectations, and power relations. Thus, space becomes a key mediator of identity formation. While race is central to Starr’s experiences, class operates as an equally significant axis of differentiation. Her attendance at a private school places her in a socio-economic context that contrasts sharply with her neighborhood, exposing her to privilege while simultaneously highlighting her marginality within that privileged space. This tension reflects what Patricia Hill Collins conceptualizes as the “matrix of domination,” in which systems of power intersect and reinforce one another. Starr’s relative economic mobility—access to quality education, safer infrastructure, and institutional resources—does not negate her racial marginalization; instead, it complicates it. She is simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged, insider and outsider. In *On the Come Up*, Bri Jackson’s experience further emphasizes the role of class. Unlike Starr, Bri remains fully embedded within a low-income environment, where financial instability directly shapes her opportunities and aspirations. Her pursuit of a music career is not only an artistic endeavor but also an economic necessity, underscoring how class constraints influence the forms that agency can take.

Thomas’s representation of space also highlights how different environments impose varying degrees of surveillance and control. In predominantly white, affluent spaces, Black girls are often hyper-visible and subject to scrutiny. Starr’s behavior at school is carefully monitored—not only by others but by herself—as she anticipates potential judgment or misinterpretation. Conversely, in marginalized communities like Garden Heights, surveillance takes a different form, often linked to policing and systemic neglect. The presence of law enforcement, economic deprivation, and limited institutional support creates an environment where safety and opportunity are precarious. These spatial dynamics reinforce the idea that identity is shaped by the conditions of visibility and vulnerability within specific social contexts. The contrast between spaces produces a persistent sense of in-betweenness. Starr belongs fully to neither world: she is too “different” at school because of her race and too “privileged” at home because of her access to elite education. This condition of partial belonging reflects a broader intersectional reality in which individuals navigate overlapping yet conflicting identities. Importantly, Thomas does not present this in-betweenness solely as a source of crisis. It also becomes a site of critical awareness. By moving between spaces, Starr develops a heightened consciousness of structural inequality, recognizing how

privilege and oppression operate in different contexts. This mobility enables her to see connections that might remain invisible within a single social location.

The interplay of class, space, and identity in Thomas's novels exemplifies the core insight of intersectionality: that systems of power are mutually constitutive and cannot be analyzed in isolation. Race, gender, and class do not function as separate layers but as interdependent forces that shape lived experience in complex ways. For Black adolescent girls, this means that identity formation is always conditioned by multiple structures of inequality. The expectations placed on them, the opportunities available to them, and the risks they face are all mediated by the intersection of these axes. Thomas's narratives make this clear by embedding these dynamics within the everyday lives of her characters, rather than treating them as abstract concepts. A significant outcome of this intersectional spatial experience is the development of what can be termed spatial consciousness—a critical awareness of how different environments embody and reproduce inequality. Starr's growing recognition of the disparities between her neighborhood and her school contributes to her political awakening, reinforcing the link between personal experience and broader social critique. Similarly, Bri's navigation of economically constrained spaces shapes her understanding of systemic barriers, informing both her artistic expression and her perspective on success and identity. Thomas's exploration of class and space reveals that identity is inseparable from the social and material contexts in which it is formed. Through the spatial dualities experienced by her protagonists, she demonstrates how socio-economic disparities intersect with race and gender to produce complex, negotiated identities.

#### **4. REFRAMING BLACK ADOLESCENCE**

The emergence of Black young adult (YA) literature cannot be understood in isolation from the broader historical and cultural development of Black children's literature, media, and intellectual traditions. Its genealogy can be traced back to early twentieth-century interventions such as *The Brownies' Book*, founded by W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, and Augustus Granville Dill. This publication was not merely a literary endeavor but a radical cultural project aimed at affirming Black childhood, countering racist representations, and cultivating racial pride during a period marked by segregation and systemic exclusion. Its significance lies in its early articulation of what would later be theorized as culturally sustaining pedagogy and racial socialization through literature. At the time of its publication, the very concept of adolescence—as a distinct developmental stage—was still being formalized within Western psychology. Foundational texts such as those by G. Stanley Hall constructed adolescence as a universal biological and psychological phase, yet in practice, this category was implicitly racialized and class-bound. Drawing on what would later be critiqued through postcolonial and critical race frameworks, these early theories privileged white, middle-class male experiences, excluding Black youth from the imagined continuum of protected childhood and prolonged adolescence. Scholars in the sociology of childhood, such as Joseph Kett, have shown that adolescence emerged alongside industrialization and urbanization, processes that were themselves deeply entangled with racial capitalism. Consequently, Black youth were positioned outside this developmental ideal, often perceived instead through a lens of premature adulthood. This historical exclusion is closely linked to what contemporary scholars describe as the “adultification” of Black children—a phenomenon extensively theorized within critical race theory and Black feminist thought. Research by scholars such as Stephanie Toliver and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas demonstrates how Black children are systematically denied the

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presumption of innocence afforded to their white counterparts. This denial has deep historical roots, extending from the dehumanizing logics of slavery—documented by historians like Wilma King—to contemporary instances of racial violence that circulate through digital media and public discourse.

The theoretical contributions of Christina Sharpe further deepen this analysis by situating Black childhood within the enduring afterlives of slavery. Her concept of “the wake” articulates how Black existence is continuously shaped by historical trauma and ongoing structural violence. Within this framework, categories such as “child,” “girl,” or “adolescent” are destabilized when applied to Black subjects, as their meanings are refracted through racialized signification. This aligns with semiotic and poststructuralist theories, particularly those influenced by Stuart Hall, which emphasize the fluidity of meaning and the role of discourse in constructing identity. Despite these epistemic and representational challenges, the field of Black children’s and YA literature has developed through the sustained efforts of scholars and critics committed to expanding its scope and legitimacy. Foundational figures such as Rudine Sims Bishop have introduced influential frameworks like the concept of “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” which underscores the importance of representation in shaping readers’ self-perception and social understanding. This perspective can be further enriched through reader-response theory, particularly the work of Louise Rosenblatt, which highlights the transactional relationship between reader and text in meaning-making processes. Within the specific domain of Black YA literature, scholars such as KaaVonia Hinton have played a crucial role in historicizing the genre and foregrounding its thematic concerns, including the legacies of enslavement, regional identity, and cultural memory. Her work can be situated within a broader tradition of African American literary criticism that draws on theories of cultural nationalism, memory studies, and narrative identity. Similarly, educational researchers like Wanda Brooks and Jonda McNair have employed critical literacy and pedagogical frameworks to examine how Black YA texts function in classroom contexts, emphasizing their role in fostering critical consciousness and challenging dominant canons.

The question of canonicity remains central to the field. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and field formation, the marginalization of Black YA literature can be understood as a consequence of institutional power dynamics that privilege certain forms of knowledge and aesthetic value. Scholars such as Shanetia Clark argue that expanding the canon requires not only the inclusion of diverse texts but also a re-evaluation of the criteria by which literary value is determined. This aligns with decolonial theory, particularly the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, which calls for the dismantling of Eurocentric epistemologies in literary studies. The development of Black YA literature as a distinct genre is often traced through successive “waves” of authors, beginning with pioneers such as Walter Dean Myers, Virginia Hamilton, Julius Lester, and Mildred D. Taylor. Emerging during the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements, their works were shaped by political activism and cultural nationalism, reflecting what Amiri Baraka conceptualized as art in service of liberation. Later generations of writers, including Jacqueline Woodson and Rita Williams-Garcia, expanded the thematic and stylistic range of the genre, paving the way for contemporary voices such as Angie Thomas, Jason Reynolds, and Renée Watson. While significant progress has been made, structural inequities persist within publishing and academia. Critical race theory and political economy approaches reveal how systemic barriers limit the production, dissemination, and recognition of Black literary voices. The apparent visibility of prominent Black public figures can obscure these disparities, reinforcing what theorists describe as neoliberal multiculturalism—a superficial inclusion that

leaves underlying power structures intact. A transnational perspective further complicates this analysis. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Edward Said, it becomes evident that the development of literature for young people in the English-speaking world is deeply intertwined with imperial histories. In the United Kingdom, despite increasing attention to diversity, the underrepresentation of Black authors and characters persists, reflecting broader patterns of racial inequality. Contemporary initiatives and scholarly movements, such as those led by emerging research networks, signal a growing commitment to addressing these gaps, yet much work remains to be done.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The feminist and intersectional analysis of the works of Angie Thomas ultimately reveals a transformative contribution to the field of young adult literature—one that extends beyond thematic innovation to a fundamental reconfiguration of whose stories are told, how they are told, and why they matter. Across this study, it has been demonstrated that Thomas's fiction does not merely insert Black female protagonists into an existing literary framework; rather, it actively reshapes that framework by centering Black girlhood as a critical site of identity formation, political consciousness, and narrative authority. From the theoretical grounding in Black feminist thought and intersectionality to the close analysis of identity, voice, class, and space, Thomas's novels—particularly *The Hate U Give* and *On the Come Up*—demonstrate that adolescence is neither a universal nor neutral developmental category. Instead, it is deeply structured by systems of power that differentially shape the experiences of young people along the axes of race, gender, and class. By foregrounding these dynamics, Thomas challenges earlier traditions of YA literature that have historically privileged white, middle-class subjectivities, thereby exposing the limitations of dominant developmental and literary paradigms. A central contribution of Thomas's work lies in its articulation of Black female adolescence as a site of both constraint and possibility. Her protagonists navigate environments marked by structural inequality, yet they also cultivate forms of agency that are complex, relational, and evolving. As this paper has shown, agency in Thomas's fiction is not reducible to overt acts of resistance; it encompasses the gradual emergence of voice, the negotiation of identity across multiple social spaces, and the use of creativity as a means of self-definition. In this sense, Thomas expands the conceptual boundaries of feminist agency, aligning with and extending Black feminist traditions that emphasize lived experience, collective struggle and the politics of representation.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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