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THE IMAGE OF A NATION IN ANGIE THOMAS'S *THE HATE U GIVE*¹ (2017)

Abstract

The paper offers an imagological analysis of Thomas's debut novel *The Hate U Give* (2017) with the aim of showing that the cultural image of the Black race is a firmly rooted construct in the United States. The analysis is based on the ideas proposed by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006) and suggests that despite the well-established theoretical ideas of American-ness and the greatness of the American nation, there is no single nation to speak of in the US society. Anderson suggests that the society has preconceived beliefs on members of certain (racial, ethnic) groups, which the novel clearly depicts through the novel's protagonist, Starr Carter, who engages in code switching in order to get a better education and, thus, a chance for success outside of the black ghetto. The pre-established notions and stereotypes, often promoted

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via populist discourse of the dominant group, prevent unification of people into a nation and at the same time give rise to nationalism, racism, and hatred.

Keywords: Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, populism, racism

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.—W. E. B. Du Bois

Introduction: An Image of Inequality

By now, there is a widely accepted consensus within the humanities that the formation of the American identity and the idea of the American nation is based on the myth of “universal, democratic egalitarianism” (12) as Patrick Colm Hogan suggests in his study *American Literature and American Identity* (2020). In his book, Hogan notices a deep ambivalence as he investigates the idealistic way that American authors, such as Melville, Cooper, Douglass, Hawthorne, and others, imagined American identity, which clashes with the nation’s pitiless discrimination related to race, gender, and class. In this way, the idea of the image of the nation is put forth as an important concept used and abused by various groups for various interests. In particular, the ambivalence or ambiguity present in the construction of the image of the American nation is best seen in some of the populist tendencies that aim to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are overlooked by the elite, thereby effectively showing that the nation is divided across intersections of said race, gender, and class. In fact, as the paper will show, the image of a divided nation is a dominant one in Angie Thomas’s 2017 young adult novel *The Hate U Give*. Written in a simple, but emotionally engaging, style appealing to its target demographics, Thomas’s novel represents race, language, and social status as key identity factors that determine both the characters’ self-image and the image of nation as deeply cleft.

Timothy Brennan insists that nations “are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative fiction plays a decisive role” (49). In her review of Robert Parkinson’s book *The Common Cause*, Annette Gordon-Reed asserts that “being an American is a matter neither of blood nor of cultural connections forged over time. It is,

instead, a commitment to a set of ideals famously laid down by the country's founders and refined over generations with a notion of progress as a guiding principle. . . . Of course, what it means to be an American is not—has never been—so simple a proposition.” In other words, although much progress has been made since the birth of the nation, it seems that the founding idea that “all men are created equal” still might be understood as it was originally written—excluding ideas (or even the possibility) of diversity of gender, class, and race from the definition.

Namely, the deeply rooted patriarchal, racist, and classist ideas are still evident in the treatment of women, non-White races and ethnic groups, and people of lower economic status in the United States. One such example is surely the 350-year-old position of perceiving Black people as inferior. For centuries, the black color has widely been associated with something evil, dangerous, filthy, unknown, and therefore undesirable (Morris 245; Tsri 38–40). This view was particularly embraced and exploited during the incipient period of slavery in the United States to dehumanize the slaves and justify their inhumane treatment, and it later persisted and was mirrored in segregation laws, humiliation, and unequal opportunity for African Americans. The Black Lives Matter movement testifies to the fact that even in the twenty-first century African Americans are not seen as “equal” despite the fact that, according to the 2020 Census, African Americans comprise little over twelve percent of the population, making it “the largest racial minority” in the United States (“Racial and Ethnic Diversity”). Taking these notions as foundation, the paper offers an imagological reading of the nation as represented in Angie Thomas's debut young adult novel *The Hate U Give* (2017), and suggests that the commonplace image of the country fostering “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as its main ideals is purely fictional since it rests on populist roots.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*² (2006) provides key notions for the imagological analysis of a nation. Anderson suggests that the society has preconceived beliefs about members of certain nations or groups (6–7), which the novel clearly depicts in its reiteration and critique of the cultural image of the Black race as inferior, lazy, and violent as firmly rooted in the idea of American identity. From this stereotypical view, the figure or image of a black person,

² The study was first published in 1983, but for the purposes of this paper, the authors refer to the second, revised edition published in 2006.

particularly male black person, as a criminal and drug addict is established in both the cultural representations and the minds of people (Smiley and Fakunle 350–51), and it spills over into discriminative practices against a large part of the population, preventing the myth of equality to become real. In fact, as Annette Gordon-Reed establishes, “[a] series of widely reported events involving black people and law enforcement has raised anew the question of exactly what type of citizenship African-Americans possess. That the United States has a race problem is not exactly news.” The paper thus suggests that despite the well-established theoretical ideas of American-ness and the greatness of the American nation, there is no single image of a nation to speak of in the US society due to the ingrained images of certain groups as both un-American and criminal. Moreover, the identification of a “common enemy” homogenizes the rest of the population in performing the image of the “real” people. In exposing this mechanism, the novel not only represents an image of the American nation as populist and divided but also requires its citizens to accept this state of affairs in order to possibly make changes in the future.

Populism, False Unity, and Double-Consciousness

According to Ernesto Laclau’s *On Populist Reason* (2005), populism relies on “the discursive construction of social division” (231) as well as on the “illusion” that “there is a natural or essential link” (230) between people belonging to a certain group or class, for example, workers. Moreover, because people have multiple identities (racial, ethnic, gender, age and so on) the idea of a nation and its existence constantly shifts, making “nationalism” an empty signifier (Laclau 227). In Michael Titlestad’s words, “[t]his false unity facilitates the category of ‘the people,’ a trope that achieves an operative ideological valence (the *real* people), related to but distinct from the *populus* integral to classical democracy” (1). Paradoxically, division is at the core of this false unity, and the novel’s protagonist, Starr, is fully aware of this: “I realized Williamson is one world and Garden Heights is another, and I have to keep them separate” (Thomas 36). Despite Starr’s attempt to actively decide on her social position, her attempts frequently end in frustration because, as Anderson puts it, “there is always something unchosen. In this way, nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage and birth-era—all those things one can not help” (143), which (may) become a source of discrimination. Thus, the image of a nation implies a visual image

226 in the sense of appearance, a geographical image that includes many (political,

social, cultural) forms of marginalization, an economic image, and a populist image, all of which can be seen in Thomas's novel.

In his 1998 discussion of the four pillars of American populism, Michael Kazin points out that the nation's division into extremely specific and conflicting groups simultaneously constructs what the American nation is and deconstructs it. According to him, the first pillar is the language of Americanism, which conceptualizes the United States as a unique nation of equal citizens in a self-governing republic (12). The American "people" as the second populist pillar arise from the "producer ethic," whereby "people" are the diligent, entrepreneurial male citizens who pay the country's taxes and fight its wars, excluding women and people of color. The group is set between a small, corrupt elite and the undisciplined poor (13–14). The elite is "the perpetual antithesis and exploiter of 'the people'°. . . condescending, profligate, artificial, effete, manipulative, given to intellectual instead of practical thinking, and dependent on the labor of others" (15). Finally, American populists believe that "strong movements—typically called 'crusades,' 'societies,' or 'parties' (whether or not they compete in elections)—must gird themselves for combat and not leave the field until the elitist opponent is utterly vanquished" (16), invoking violent conflict as the only means of change, combat or war being necessary for establishing and preserving a coherent national identity.

In the novel, the conflicts are both material—in the form of street violence—and psychological as Starr frequently perceives her identity as fragmented between the middle-class white world, where she receives her education, and the world of working-class black people from which she originates. The ambiguity of her identity arises from her belief that she needs to project a different image of herself when in communication with anyone who is not from the ghetto. When she is interviewed by detectives Gomez and Wilkes she observes: "My voice is changing already. It always happens around 'other' people, whether I'm at Williamson or not. I don't talk like me or sound like me. I choose every word carefully and make sure I pronounce them well. I can never, ever let anyone think I'm ghetto" (Thomas 95). Her rejection of the ghetto is a recognition of the fact that, as Kazin suggests, "[t]he rising of 'the people' was an avowedly white affair; the democratic vision rarely extended across the color line" (14).

Phenomena such as nationalism, typically a significant component of populist views, and racism point to the fact that nation is an "imagined political 227

community” (Anderson 6) constructed through the way members of a particular nation or group view their own nation or group, and the way their nation is treated by others. The novel thus projects a self-image of the American Black people as a double construction of how they believe the white people think about them, which simultaneously implies both an internalized view of stereotypes and an ironic view of these same stereotypes about themselves. It also implies a double construction of how they believe they should behave or speak in order to seem credible and non-threatening. In fact, both groups are imagined in the process and set in specific relations to each other while glossing over their numerous internal similarities and differences, suggesting that a nation is indeed an imagined community of “others”; there is no sense of identity or unity because there is no authenticity. Starr, like many others, feels that she needs to act differently in order to fit into the wider society. Through the representation of Starr Carter’s family, Thomas acknowledges the double-consciousness that informs the perception and interaction of black and white people. Specifically, she offers the images of blacks as constitutive of their identity, the image of blacks as believed to be construed by whites, as well as the image of whites, as constructed both by themselves and by blacks, through the representation of Starr’s boyfriend Chris and the representation of the hateful officer One-Fifteen. In this, the image of the Black American does not stand as an opposition to reality or the real, but as a potent constitutive aspect of the realities people make through various cultural expressions.

Despite the fact that human identity is a complex construct and that discrimination based on identity is an intricate issue particularly,³ the novel is steeped into dichotomies (us – them, white – black, rich – poor, educated – uneducated), which produce the dominant images of black and white as mutually opposed. In fact, according to Anderson, racism manifests itself “not across national boundaries, but within them” in the form of the “principle of innate, inherited superiority” (150), which is a simplifying mechanism creating an *image* of the opposition between the colonial, superior, white individual and a host of inferiors, servants, people of color: “a grimly amusing *tableau vivant*: the bourgeois gentleman speaking poetry against a backcloth of spacious mansions and gardens filled with mimosa and bougainvillea, and a large supporting cast of

³ This is explained in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, which considers the “multidimensionality” (139) of human experience, that is, multiple aspects of a person’s political and social identity.

houseboys, grooms, gardeners, cooks, amahs, maids, washerwomen, and, above all, horses” (150–51). For this reason, Du Bois’s idea of twoness—both as representing a sense of internal division within the black community and a sense of social division—seems more apt for this discussion.

Undeniably, the plights of African Americans have been recorded in literary history, first, through diaries, and memoirs, and later in poems, novels, plays, and speeches by black political activists. Angie Thomas’s novel continues this tradition by shedding light on the many troubles of the contemporary African American community, such as racism, police brutality, gang conflicts, identity, and political activism. In many of these texts, like in Thomas’s novel, both writers and protagonists display the notion of double-consciousness as put forth by W. E. B. Du Bois over one hundred years ago, a concept that seems to still be the core issue of African Americans even today: “the twoness, —an American, a Negro” (8).

Du Bois conceptualizes a black American as a single body torn between two worlds that seem mutually exclusive and unattainable (8–9). Moreover, the sense of distressed identity is further enhanced by “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 8). In other words, Black Americans are unable to construct their identity irrespective of the racialized gaze of the white majority. Thus, skin color, as well as economic status, education, geography, and vernacular, constitute the black as the Other and make it impossible for black Americans to feel fully American, that is, as a part of the mainstream imagined American identity. The eternal desire “to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (Du Bois 9) is prevented not only by whites but also by blacks, that is by “the poverty and ignorance of his people” who tempt the educated blacks “toward quackery and demagoguery” (9) as both groups demand a separation between the two identities.

Ernest Allen, Jr.’s, critical stance on what he suggests is “a general pattern of misinterpretation” (218) of Du Bois’s double-consciousness as a cultural concept, does not undermine the paper’s use of the concept. That Du Bois has introduced the concept “for tactical, political reasons” (Allen 234) to “reconceptualise the problem of black *Angst* . . . as one *specific* to the Afro-American Talented Tenth” (Allen 235), only further establishes its relevance in the context

of Thomas's novel. Namely, thanks to her superior education, the African American protagonist Starr represents the very "Talented Tenth," who could potentially "uplift the remaining nine-tenths of the race" (Allen 235) closing thus the gap between both the races and classes, but who ultimately fail at the task because true unity is still an impossibility. Starr's attempt to achieve that imagined idea comes with a risk of being shunned not only by white people but also by her own community, which often causes a rift in her identity, "and at times has even seemed about to make them [her] ashamed of themselves [herself]" (Du Bois 10). Moving away from the notion that double-consciousness may represent the anguish of a fractured identity, Allen argues that it simply represents "a divided mind while facing practical choices as a person of African descent" (245). Even so, the idea of having to make decisions as an African American rather than an American affirms the thesis that no unified national identity exists. To illustrate this as well as the main aspects contributing to the way the image of a nation is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed by means of the construction and deconstruction of the protagonist's identity, the analysis will be focused on key aspects that comprise identity in Thomas's novel: race, language, and social status, all of which are also contained in both Kazin's notion of populism and Anderson's conception of a nation.

Race and Racialized Violence

Written by a young African American about young African Americans, *The Hate U Give* represents a relevant and informed, but more importantly, realistic representation of the everyday life of the said demographic. In her representation, Thomas did not embellish or favor black protagonists; some of them, such as Starr's family and Uncle Carlos, are hardworking people who strive for a better life, whereas others, like gang members, still perpetuate the stereotype of a male African American as a thug. In the same way, the handful of white characters display either realistic or stereotypical features. On the one hand, there is Starr's boyfriend Chris, who seems like a genuine person wishing to learn all that he can about her past and present. On the other hand, there is the "bad white cop" stereotype, a police officer mainly referred to as One Fifteen, whose killing of the innocent Khalil Starr witnesses. Paradoxically, by employing a seemingly simple dichotomy of characters, the novel exposes the dichotomy of the populist society, providing thus insight into the complexities of racial issues in today's United States.

Khalil is represented as an innocent victim of police brutality, a character made stereotype by the cruel and perpetuating realities of American life. His difficult childhood includes having to take care of his addict mother and dealing drugs to support his family. This, in turn, leaves him with a criminal record, and a sense of deep racial and social injustice. When he and Starr are pulled over by the police on their way home after a party, he is not fully cooperative, as for him the idea of equality or unity is an impossibility. There is no point in trying to adhere to the rules, when rules are there to oppress one rather than enforce order and justice: “Khalil breaks a rule—he doesn’t do what the cop wants. ‘What you pull us over for?’ – ‘License, registration, and proof of insurance.’ – ‘I said what you pull us over for?’” (Thomas 21). After he is shot to death merely for trying to check on Starr, the reader is immediately reminded of similar real-life incidents, and indeed, “[t]he novel germinated in Thomas’ anger over the 2009 police killing of Oscar Grant, the 22-year-old shot in the back on a Bay Area Rapid Transit platform” (Long).

When the news of the murder reaches national headlines, the mainstream media portrays Khalil as a stereotypical black criminal: “The drug dealer. That’s how they see him. It doesn’t matter that he’s suspected of doing it. ‘Drug dealer’ is louder than ‘suspect’ ever will be” (Thomas 113). In this way, Thomas reflects on the preconceptions and stereotypes that white people have of themselves and of African Americans, and vice versa, which perpetuates racial tensions destroying the possibility of a unified American nation by reiterating populist notions. According to Kazin, “[p]itched battles between us and them” (2) is a rhetorical mechanism that populist public speakers and mainstream mass media employ heavily. For example, simultaneously as Khalil, the black youth, is represented as a drug dealer, the white police officer is portrayed as a victim of circumstance, brave enough to “protect and serve” in her now notorious neighborhood. In this rhetoric, whereas Khalil opposes the idea of honest, hardworking people, the policeman embodies it. As a response, Starr invokes another, parallel and relevant, dichotomy by comparing the police to slave-owners who “thought they were making a difference in black people’s lives too. Saving them from their ‘wild African ways.’ Same shit, different century” (Thomas 245–46). In fact, early on in the novel, to show the line of continuity of such oppositions, Thomas describes the crime scene so that it invokes the nineteenth-century racist and colonial stereotypes, which culminated in public exhibitions of racialized and gendered bodies (see, for example, Tromp and Valerius 2008), accord-

ing to which the black was inferior and subhuman, an artefact to be gawked at: “[t]hey leave Khalil’s body in the street like it’s an exhibit” (Thomas 25). The act dehumanizes Khalil, as does the subsequent legal procedure: “I told the truth. I did everything I was supposed to do, and it wasn’t fucking good enough. Khalil’s death wasn’t horrible enough to be considered a crime” (Thomas 388).

The idea that racial violence is an unending phenomenon suggests that there can be no solution to the problem: “I’ve seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black” (Thomas 34). Moreover, centuries of such violence bring no enlightenment or deconstruction of mutual stereotypes, best represented in Starr’s cry during street riots: “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” (412). Ultimately, the lack of progress and a sense of hopelessness forces both sides to reject ideals and embrace the preconceived views about one another, which closes the vicious circle of violence, “All that ‘Kumbaya’ peaceful shit clearly don’t work. They don’t listen till we tear something up” (Thomas 397), preventing dialogue and national unity.

Language

The relationship between Starr and her white boyfriend Chris serves as a model for bridging the racial gap as they consciously try to change certain aspects of their identity in order to better understand one another. Starr does this by code-switching, and Chris by immersing himself into cultural aspects of African American culture. He wears (expensive) Jordan sneakers, which Thomas presents as an important part of African American teenage life, and he is a fan of the popular 1990s sit-com *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. His enthusiasm for the sit-com is a token of his appreciation of Starr and her life. Namely, the story of Will, the sit-com’s Fresh Prince, mirrors that of Starr as both were sent by their parents to a safer place to escape ghetto violence and have a better chance for a successful life. The fact that Chris understands this helps Starr feel comfortable in his company: “Chris gets *The Fresh Prince*, which helps him get me. We once talked about how cool it was that Will remained himself in his new world. I slipped up and said I wish I could be like that at school. Chris said, ‘Why can’t you, Fresh Princess?’” (Thomas 83).

While Chris’s attempts to get closer to Starr are casual and easily achievable, **232** Starr, however, cannot remain herself either in her school environment or with

Chris. She is adamant to keep her two worlds apart and code-switches regularly in order to fully integrate:

I just have to be normal Starr at normal Williamson and have a normal day. That means flipping the switch in my brain so I'm Williamson Starr. Williamson Starr doesn't use slang . . . Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she's the "angry black girl." Williamson Starr is approachable. . . . Williamson Starr is nonconfrontational. (Thomas 71)

Her anxiety suggests a position of self-perceived inferiority, internalized racial inequalities, which are instilled in Black children not only by the wider social environment and its injustices but also by black parents. When she was twelve, her parents resolutely warned her how to behave if ever pulled over by the police: "Starr-Starr, you do whatever they tell you to do," he said. "Keep your hands visible. Don't make any sudden moves. Only speak when they speak to you" (Thomas 20). For those who are taught that they do not even have power in language, the idea of racial hierarchy becomes a painful reality: "Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her 'hood'" (Thomas 71). In fact, if, as Anderson suggests, the nation is "a community imagined through language" (146), it is clear that, in Starr's case, two separate nations exist. If she wishes to participate in the imagined ideal of American nation, she must conform to that ideal.

Consequently, Starr defines "normalcy" in terms of the white community, and although she hates to perpetuate common stereotypes about both the white and the Black people, she succumbs to the false ideal: "I can't stand myself for doing it, but I do it anyway" (Thomas 71). In order to fit into an imagined community, she rejects her own authenticity. As Thomas explains in an interview, "[f]or Starr, it's a form of assimilation, but under someone else's terms. Like blackness and black culture are always seen in a negative light—you have to be quiet when things are said. Sometimes code-switching means being quiet" (qtd. in Jordan). Starr admits that it is grueling to "speak with two different voices" (Thomas 301) and that she cannot be herself around white people (ibid.). The twoness of her voice and behavior suggest that she has both an internalized and an ironic view of the stereotypes about her own race, which, much like Du Bois's twoness of African American identity, tears her apart. This is particularly visible during the family barbecue at Uncle Carlos's house, both her friend Maya and Chris appear, and her worlds collide, signaling the immense strain she deals

with every day: "I never know which Starr I should be. I can use some slang, but not too much slang, some attitude, but not too much attitude, so I'm not a 'sassy black girl.' I have to watch what I say and how I say it, but I can't sound 'white.' Shit is exhausting" (357). Additionally, Chris faces the same issues during the riots in Starr's neighborhood, when he is the only white person there (392).

Despite his openness and desire to understand the African American community better, Chris gets into an almost comic debate over Black people's names, suggesting that "[t]hey're not normal" (Thomas 401). Speaking from a white person's point of view, Chris inadvertently implies that somehow white people's names represent "the norm." This is particularly jarring in the context of the cultural legacy dating back to slavery when slave owners would change the names of their slaves, since his question seems to suggest that his Black friends have to justify and explain an essential part of their identity—their name:

"Anyway, Chris," Seven says, "DeVante's got a point. What makes his name or our names any less normal than yours? Who or what defines 'normal' to you? If my pops were here, he'd say you've fallen into the trap of the white standard. . . . It's about perspective," says Seven. "Plus, most of the names white people think are unusual actually have meanings in various African languages." (401–2)

Despite Chris's failed perspective on Black people's names, their discussion ends up both enlightening him and exposing the problematic assumption that white is the standard. By suggesting otherwise, Seven illustrates how the image of identity is constructed by means of a dialectic, a form of double imaginary construction.

Class, Social Status, and Image

Early on in the novel it becomes apparent that certain African American communities, like the novel's Garden Heights, are denied a quality education and affordable and safe housing and must cross the borders of their own community to get access to it. The issue of class is shown as inextricably connected with race, since, as Anderson contends, "[t]he dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of class, rather than in those of nation" (149) – or, in other words, in division rather than unity. In order to attempt to bridge the unsurmountable divide of class, Starr goes to a predominantly white high school for middle- and

upper-class children in a better part of the town: “so many of the schools in our neighborhoods don’t prepare us well enough. That’s why when your momma talked about sending you and your brothers to Williamson, I agreed. Our schools don’t get the resources to equip you like Williamson does” (Thomas 169). Stereotypes of Black Americans as lazy and criminal, unfit for the role of a “proper” American, clash with Kazin’s notions of American “people’s” productivity and good intentions. However, it becomes clear that Black Americans are socially prevented from participating in productivity. Rather than suggesting that Black Americans somehow “naturally” deviate toward crime and laziness, it is shown that, in reality, their opportunities are limited; poverty and crime arise as consequences of systemic inequalities and injustices: “The Hate U—the letter U—Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody. T-H-U-G L-I-F-E. Meaning what society give us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out” (Thomas 17).

Aware of the circumstances in her neighborhood, Starr stopped having her school friends over in order not to make them uncomfortable by coming over to Garden Heights—a place where they would stand out and feel insecure: “I made the mistake of inviting them to a sleepover in seventh grade. . . . Hailey didn’t come. Her dad didn’t want her spending the night in ‘the ghetto.’ . . . Maya came but ended up asking her parents to come get her that night. There was a drive-by around the corner, and the gunshots scared her” (Thomas 35–36). In addition to the lack of safety, there is also a distinct lack of comfort as Starr’s house is very small and ordinary as opposed to her friends’ houses: “They live in mini-mansions. My house is just mini” (Thomas 35). Her boyfriend’s home is equally luxurious to Starr: “Chris and I were in Chris’s ridiculously large room. The third floor of his parents’ mansion is a suite for him, a perk of being the last born to empty-nesters. I try to forget that he has an entire floor as big as my house and hired help that looks like me” (Thomas 80–81).

Despite the fact that the readers see their love as genuine, and that Starr says that she does not need to pretend around Chris because “Chris is the kind of normal I really want. The normal where I don’t have to choose which Starr to be” (Thomas 162–63), the fact remains that she is hiding the truth about her life from Chris because she does not want him to imagine her as a poor girl from the ghetto, immersed in violence: “[t]hat’s why I can’t tell Chris I’m the witness” (163). He is unaware that Starr witnessed the killing of her two childhood friends, Natasha and Khalil, and by hiding this part of her life from him, she does not live authentically. The surging anger related to media craze about

Khalil's death and the immense pain and powerlessness she feels are channeled toward Chris, not as her boyfriend, but as a privileged white boy. She perceives the difference in their both race and class as an insurmountable obstacle: "Lying in his California King-size bed in his suite in his gigantic house, I realize the truth. . . . 'We shouldn't be together,' I say. 'Why not?' 'My old house in Garden Heights could fit in your house'" (375). Whereas Chris does not care about this, because he has grown up in the position of privilege, his "belonging" never questioned, which allowed him to be confident rather than self-conscious, Starr is much more anxious about other people's opinions. She is bothered by the fact that they are perceived differently, and that people do not immediately register them as a couple, since he, according to her and the notions of wider (white) society, which she acknowledges as "real," should be with someone else: "Blond. Rich. White" (376). She is afraid that his sheltered life of economic and social privilege prevents him from accepting her and truly understanding and empathizing with problems that plague African Americans. Khalil's murder was the catalyst that made her more sensitive to the difference in their social status, and she feels that she is betraying not just her murdered friend, but her family, community, and African American history altogether, evoking the sense of twoness: "I can't stand myself for doing it, but I do it anyway" (Thomas 71).

In addition to Starr and Chris, Starr's uncle Carlos is also a character who attempts to straddle the border between classes and groups. He is a Black officer, who must accept the rules of hegemony in order to keep his job and enjoy the privilege of a better life. He lives in a "humongous house in the suburbs" (Thomas 30) and feels obliged to the job and the community that made this possible. For him, the guilt of the white police officer who shot an unarmed boy is not a given: "'You mean y'all wanna justify what that pig did,' Daddy says. 'Investigate my ass.' 'Maverick, don't make this something it's not,' Uncle Carlos says. 'A sixteen-year-old black boy is dead because a white cop killed him. What else could it be?'" (Thomas 51). When Starr thinks of Uncle Carlos, she contemplates his double identity too. On the one hand, he is a police officer and thus participates in perpetuating the oppression, but on the other hand, he is black: "When that hook hits, a collective 'Fuck the police' thunders off Magnolia Avenue, probably loud enough to reach the heavens. I yell it out too. Part of me is like, 'What about Uncle Carlos the cop?'" (394). To maintain his objectivity as a police officer, but also his social status, Carlos must ignore the racial implications of this crime, suggesting that Khalil's murder "isn't about black or white" (51), which

During the riots, Starr finally aligns with her community and rejects the self-imposed sense of a double identity, embracing the need to protest. Starr is ready to fight injustice and violence with violence, if necessary, which is something that Chris does not understand: “I snap. ‘I did everything right, and it didn’t make a fucking difference. I’ve gotten death threats, cops harassed my family, somebody shot into my house, all kinds of shit. And for what? Justice Khalil won’t get? They don’t give a fuck about us, so fine. I no longer give a fuck” (252). Her new determination echoes the historical fact that African Americans had to literally fight for equality and justice and foreshadows her friend DeVante’s later statement that white people “don’t listen till we tear something up” (Thomas 397). In this sense, the pre-established notions and stereotypes endorsing the image of Black people as low-life criminals, often promoted via populist discourse of the dominant group, become a kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the underprivileged are given no other recourse to achieve justice apart from violent protests. The very end of the novel, when Starr promises that she will not forget, be quiet, and give up (Thomas 287), only implies that the novel is still only a representation and commentary of the national and racial discourses in the United States. It does not propose change or envision a different future. The idea of juxtaposition of the American white elite with the un-American non-white masses living at the periphery of American centers is based on systemic inequalities which prevent unification of people into a nation, giving rise to racial and social prejudices, and hatred.

Conclusion

Concepts and stereotypes that white people have of themselves and black Americans in the novel, and vice versa, perpetuate the tension between them, and ultimately rescind the idea of one, unified American nation. According to Anderson, a nation is always “imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7), which the novel exposes as unattainable in the deeply divided American society. The very notion that American populism is founded on the irreconcilable difference between “us and them” (Kazin 2) subverts the idea of a single American nation. In fact, the black and white are imagined and referred to as two geographically, culturally, and economically separate communities—Garden Heights and the suburbs. The main protagonist’s sense of twoness reflects this division as she first wavers

between two separate identities, trying to belong to both communities, and then ultimately embraces one as a stance against the other: “Khalil, I’ll never forget. I’ll never give up. I’ll never be quiet. I promise” (444).

The idea that being black implies participating in a continuous struggle is opposed to the image of the dominant, monolithic white, which functions as a given since, “White people been sticking together forever” (Thomas 359). *The Hate U Give* suggests that the American society is construed by two separate communities, the privileged and the underprivileged, annulling the idea of unity. Khalil’s murder is the catalyst which helps Starr realize that her attempt to inhabit the boundary between the two sides is futile, as she will hardly see justice or fair treatment, regardless of her attempts to participate in the privileged life by going to a white school or socializing with white friends. Despite enthusiastic attempts of the few, depicted by Thomas through the characters of Starr, Chris, and Uncle Carlos, the American nation ultimately still remains an imagined construct of predominantly white, educated, successful people—a nation that does not offer a sense of horizontal comradeship, but feeds on the populist discourse of division.

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PRIKAZ NACIJE U ROMANU ANGIE THOMAS *TAJ HEJT U GLAVI* (2017)

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Rad predstavlja imagološku analizu romana *Taj hejt u glavi* autorice Angie Thomas (2017., na hrvatski jezik prevela Ivana Šarić 2019.) utemeljenu na ideji Benedicta Andersona o naciji kao zamišljenoj zajednici. Analiza pokazuje da je negativna kulturna slika afroameričkih građana u Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama s jedne strane čvrsto ukorijenjena, a s druge u suprotnosti s idealima amerikanizma i snage američke nacije. Naime, roman podriiva ideju o jedinstvenoj američkoj naciji, s obzirom na to da u američkom društvu postoje i čvrsto opstaju predrasude o nebjelačkim rasnim i etničkim skupinama. Protagonistica romana, Starr Carter, oprimjeruje takvu situaciju, jer je prisiljena mijenjati kodove ponašanja i govora kako bi imala pristup boljem obrazovanju te posljedično izlasku iz geta i uspjehu. Predrasude i stereotipi o Afroamerikancima promoviraju se kroz populistički diskurs dominantne skupine, onemogućavaju ujedinjenje građana u naciju i potiču nacionalizam, rasizam te mržnju.

Ključne riječi: Angie Thomas, *Taj hejt u glavi*, populizam, rasizam