"What's the Point of Having a Voice If You're Gonna Be Silent?": Youth Activism in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

A growing number of people are turning to young adult literature as a road map to address social injustice through activism, which suggests that literary texts are neither apolitical nor static works of art exploring 'timeless' themes. This article examines how two recent young adult protest novels, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017) and *The Marrow Thieves* by Claire Dimaline (2017), resist the emphasis that neoliberalism—an economic philosophy that advocates for free markets and deregulation—places on extreme individualism and competition. In doing so, these books model collective action as a remedy for neoliberal policies that perpetuate systemic oppression.

The authors dedicate this article to the young adults of color in the U.S. who died at the hands of police violence while we were writing this article:
Adam Toledo (13); **Stavian Rodriguez** (15); **Angelo Crooms** (16); **Ma'Khia Bryant** (16); **Devon Tillman Gregory** (18); **Sincere Pierce** (18); **Christian Hall** (19); **Daunte Wright** (20); **Jordan Walton** (21); **Anthony Alvarez** (22); **Casey Goodson** (23); **Dolal Idd** (23); **Eduardo Parra** (24); **Zonterius Johnson** (24); **Andrew Hogan** (25); **Donovon Lynch** (25); **Rodney Applewhite** (25); **Rodney Eubanks** (25).

Moreover, we wish to offer our condolences to the family and friends of **George Floyd**, whose heinous death on May 25, 2020, was also racially motivated. We were motivated to write this article because we share the outrage many U.S. citizens feel as a result of the militarization of the U.S. police force during the neoliberal era, when the U.S. government began to sell (because it was profitable to do so) outdated military equipment to local police forces.

In *Stay Alive: Surviving Capitalism's Coming Hunger Games*, Michael Harris describes how youth activists protesting reforms to Hong Kong's election system in 2014 adopted the three-finger salute from Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy as "a symbol of solidarity and defiance" (2). Young protesters in Thailand did the same earlier that year, as did protesters in Myanmar in 2021. In the United States, Emma González and David Hogg, survivors of the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, and co-founders of #NeverAgain, a social media movement committed to gun control, have each mentioned that their activism was in part inspired by the *Harry Potter* books (Cerón). Another Parkland survivor, fifteen-year-old Anna Crean, provided a rationale for her and her classmates' speaking out against gun violence when she observed, "We can make a difference because that's what books and movies have told us since we were little" (Trombetta).

These young people are not alone in connecting young adult (YA) literature—a category of books written for and marketed to teenagers—to many types of youth activism, from the political to the environmental. Andrew Slack, co-founder of the Harry Potter Alliance, describes how the non-profit organization aims to redirect the passion that millions of readers feel for the *Harry Potter* books toward addressing social problems such as poverty, racism, genocide, and environmental degradation. To date, the organization has donated 400,000 books to underserved communities using money its members raised and collected more than 400,000 signatures for a petition that led the Warner Bros. corporation to ensure that its Harry Potter licensed chocolate products are Fair Trade certified ("What We Do").

As these anecdotes suggest, a growing number of people are turning to YA literature as a road map to address social injustice through activism, indicating that literary texts are neither apolitical nor static works of art. Rather, as Jane Tompkins argues, literary texts represent a writer's efforts to remake the social order. From this perspective,

> novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way

> a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment. (xi)

To follow Tompkins' argument, it is thus important to attend closely to the cultural work that individual literary texts perform.

This article examines how recent YA protest novels resist the emphasis that neoliberalism—an economic, political, and social philosophy that advocates for free markets and deregulation, and which is accepted as an inevitable truth in many western nations today—places on extreme individualism and competition among people. After offering a brief overview of neoliberalism, we examine how two recent North American YA novels, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017) and *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline (2017), model collective action as a remedy for neoliberal policies that perpetuate systemic oppression. In doing so, we argue that these books expose adolescents to alternatives to neoliberalism, including taking positions of activism, resistance, and vocal social criticism, while also inviting them to imagine more compassionate and just forms of social organization, particularly those that resist neoliberalism's emphasis on extreme individualism and competition.

A Brief Overview of Neoliberalism and Its Links to YA Literature

During the early nineteenth century, economic 'liberalism' was equated with industrialists' desire for governmental laissez-faire in the U.S. and other economic powerhouses; eventually, this perspective evolved into a political position that privileged industrialists invoked to forestall government regulation. However, starting in the 1880s and continuing into the 1970s, American progressives pushed for laws that would regulate industries and improve social support systems. During this time, the U.S. government implemented many reforms, such as the enfranchisement of women voters (1920), the desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces (1948) and public schools (1954), the Civil Rights Act (1964), and

the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970). During the 1980s, however, the Reagan administration began rolling back progressive regulations by embracing what was thought of as a new form of nineteenth-century economic liberalism, one that shared its forebear's preference for small government and which led to the deregulation of major industries, such as telecommunications, the airline industry, and public utility companies. Reagan supporters called this movement 'neoliberalism,' even though the ideas were not new at all.

Despite all evidence to the contrary (Leonhardt 2), advocates of neoliberalism promote the idea that individual entrepreneurs, rather than large governments, are best positioned to stimulate economic growth when they are made to compete to deliver goods and services (Harvey 2). Those who succeed are rewarded for their efforts and those who do not are ostensibly motivated to work harder. Today, neoliberalism's emphasis on individual exceptionalism and competition shapes virtually all domains of human life in the U.S. and Canada, and so the twinned discourses of exceptionalism and competition are naturalized in many popular culture texts.

As Girlhood Studies scholars Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby have explained, neoliberalism's emphasis on hyper-individualism and competition seems to erase structural oppression:

> modern-day girlhood is now defined by individualism, consumerism, hypersexuality, and the belief that girls can do, be, and have anything they want without fear of structural inequalities such as sexism, racism, or homophobia interfering with their individual efforts to achieve success. As a consequence, *such structural inequities have now come to be seen as individual rather than social problems.* (288, emphasis added)

We share Pomerantz and Raby's concern that neoliberalism's emphasis on individual exceptionalism and competition can lead to a false assumption that personal weakness, rather than structural inequity, is the source of an individual's failure to thrive in the modern world. In our previous work, we have traced how neoliberalism in YA literature

enables narratives that overvalue protagonists who are "superspecial individuals," a term we use to signify exceptional individualism; minimize the impact of structural racism, sexism, and classism; and demonstrate the uncritiqued exploitation of biological and natural resources (Connors and Trites 31-41). In YA literature, characters who individually overcome social obstacles are often positioned as neoliberal heroes that help overthrow massive structures of injustice. When this is the case, these books imply that systemic problems such as racism and sexism are best addressed by individuals, rather than groups of people working together to advocate for social justice.

Ewan Morrison identifies the neoliberal trend in twenty-first-century YA dystopian literature the following way:

> What marks these dystopias out from previous ones is that, almost without exception, the bad guys are not the corporations but the state and those well-meaning liberal leftists who want to make the world a better place. Books such as *The Giver*, *Divergent* and the *Hunger Games* trilogy are, whether intentionally or not, substantial attacks on many of the foundational projects and aims of the left: big government, the welfare state, progress, social planning and equality. They support one of the key ideologies that the left has been battling against for a century: the idea that human nature, rather than nurture, determines how we act and live. These books propose a laissez-faire existence, with heroic individuals who are guided by the innate forces of human nature against evil social planners.

In other words, despite modeling how social activism can be deployed, some YA dystopias are themselves inevitably steeped in the political and economic theory of neoliberalism. However, the pattern Morrison describes is not limited to dystopian fiction; it is also discernible in other genres of YA fiction, such as contemporary realism and post-apocalyptic fiction.

In recent years, some YA protest novels—many of them written by writers of color—have begun to emphasize the role of collectivism as an antidote to neoliberalism's emphasis on exceptional individualism, which erases structural oppression. In books like *The Hate U Give* and *The Marrow Thieves*, teenage protagonists learn to occupy positions of activism as they work alongside members of their local communities to resist structural oppression and, by extension, neoliberalism's overvaluing of hyper-individualism and competition.

The Hate U Give: Cultivating Change by Speaking Out

Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* is an open critique of structural racism and a renunciation of the exceptional individual whose extraordinary talents alone can save the world from itself. Starr Carter is a sixteen-year-old Black girl who lives in a poor, African American neighborhood and attends Williamson, an elite high school in an upper-middle-class white community almost an hour's drive away. When a party Starr attends in her neighborhood is disrupted by gunfire, her friend Khalil offers to drive her home, but they are stopped by a white police officer who orders Khalil to get out of the car and hold still. When the officer returns to his patrol car with Khalil's identification, the teenager unexpectedly reaches into the driver's side window to grab a brush and check on Starr. The officer subsequently shoots Khalil three times, killing him and leaving Starr as the only witness. The central tension in *The Hate U Give* is thus attributable to two competing frameworks: the neoliberal value placed on the actions and life of the white police officer enforcing structural racism and the concomitant rejection of that valuation in favor of collectivism employed in the name of racial justice. The knowledge production of sharing information collectively for the betterment of those who will listen is the novel's most important contribution to its rejection of neoliberalism.

Over the course of the story, Starr's understanding of the role that unjust social systems play in producing and perpetuating oppression rooted in race deepens as she learns more about her culture and its

history from people around her, including her father, Maverick. He shares stories about Black activists who fought for social justice, particularly the Black Panthers, an activist organization that formed in Oakland, California, in the 1960s to contest police brutality against African Americans. Maverick tells his children stories about the group's co-founder, Huey Newton, and its mission to empower the Black community by educating its members so that they could learn how to resist social injustice. Moreover, as a fan of Tupac Shakur, Maverick teaches Starr about "THUG LIFE," an acronym the rapper is said to have interpreted as meaning "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody"; in other words, the systematic racial oppression of young people harms everyone in a society.

Helping his daughter connect that idea to systemic oppression, Maverick explains:

> Corporate America don't bring jobs to our communities, and they damn sure ain't quick to hire us. Then, shit, even if you do have a high school diploma, 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. It's easier to find some crack than it is to find a good school around here. (169)

He calls the drug dealing business in their local community "a multi-billion-dollar industry," pointing out that the profits don't return to community members, which is not unusual for a neoliberal enterprise: "That shit is flown into our communities, but I don't know anybody with a private jet" (170). Maverick concludes, "That's the hate they're giving us, baby, a system designed against us" (170).

Her father's instruction allows Starr to connect the protests that have broken out after Khalil's brutal murder to systemic oppression. She notes, "Everybody's pissed 'cause [the white police officer is] not the first one to do something like this and get away with it. It's been

happening, and people will keep rioting until it changes" (170-71). Starr consequently concludes that systemic oppression "won't change if we don't *say* something" (171, emphasis added). The attorney representing her tells Starr, "I'll do whatever I can to make sure you're *heard* Starr […]. You matter and your *voice* matters" (219, emphasis added). Thus, Starr internalizes the knowledge that her voice is her most precious gift, reasoning, "What's the point of having a voice if you're gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn't be?" (252). Via the knowledge she gains from her parents, her attorney, her uncle, and her friends, Starr becomes an advocate for her community. Nevertheless, she is not the neoliberal hero who acts alone. Far from it, she is part of a collective of people protesting police brutality. The ties to her community and her awareness of national sociopolitical conditions for African American peoples empower Starr to speak her truth to the District Attorney. Eventually, while standing on an empty police car during a peaceful protest, she uses her voice as a 'weapon,' speaking through a bullhorn to amplify her message and sharing Khalil's story to agitate for social justice and inspire other people in her community to do the same (410). Starr tells the police trying to subdue the protestors: "His life mattered. Khalil lived! [...] Khalil lived!" (412). Having exercised her voice to call for justice, she makes the following promises to herself:

> […] I'll never forget.
> I'll never give up.
> *I'll never be quiet.* (444, emphasis added)

The book does not depict Starr's decision to speak out against police brutality as single-handedly producing social change: at the conclusion, the officer who murdered Khalil is exonerated by a grand jury. Instead, *The Hate U Give* argues that the seeds of change are sown when one person is willing to listen to her community and then lend her voice to a chorus of others demanding justice. Starr's activism is not based on material goods, profiteering, or competitive, individualistic entrepreneurship; rather, it is steeped in collectivism and her belief in—and hope for—change.

In direct contrast to Starr, an adult called King—who leads a gang called the King Lords—positions himself as an entrepreneur that does not need to follow the conventions of his community. He pimps out his girlfriend, beating her and their children when he is drunk; he commits arson to enact revenge; and he is a drug dealer with no sense of obligation to the larger community. Eventually, a member of his own gang, emotionally worn out by King's effect on the community and physically worn out by King beating him, lets the police know where King hides the drugs he sells. King's entrepreneurial self-interest motivates him to believe that he is better than other people and above the law, which causes him to be the most socially isolated individual in the novel. His entrepreneurial competitiveness, his refusal to work with his community, his toxic masculinity, and his exploitation of his own family and fellow gang members serve as the object lesson that runs counterpoint to Starr's story: collectively working within a community leads to better results than competitive, self-serving neoliberal attitudes. The novel thus positions collectivism and vocal activism as being especially important for economically and racially oppressed groups.

The Marrow Thieves: Cultivating Change Through Communal Knowledge

While *The Hate U Give*, as a realist novel, operates in what literature for youth scholar Maria Nikolajeva calls "linear time" because it progresses in identifiable time structures (52), Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* is a work of YA dystopian fiction that exists in "mythical time." Time, in the novel, moves in a cyclical pattern that evokes the vagueness of time common to mythology, folklore, and sacred writings (Nikolajeva 1). In this dystopic story, a series of climate-related environmental catastrophes have contaminated the groundwater in North America, unleashing a deadly plague that ravages the population and leaves non-Indigenous people who survive it unable to dream, driving them insane and, in some cases, suicidal. In the ensuing fight for the remaining potable water, the majority of which exists on tribal lands, native peoples are driven from their homes and forced into exile. Compounding matters,

scientists working in concert with the Catholic Church discover a solution that allows non-native peoples to dream again, but it requires the extraction of bone marrow from Indigenous peoples, which ultimately kills them. Government operatives known as Recruiters are thus tasked with hunting tribal peoples and interring them in stifling residential schools run by headmistresses and Cardinals—institutions evocative of those introduced to strip Indigenous children of their languages and tribal cultures in the U.S. and Canada in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. In this novel, however, it is not just their culture that is stolen from Indigenous peoples. Their oppressors take their bone marrow as well, thus replicating historical cycles of Euro-Canadians surviving at the cost of native peoples.

After some Recruiters capture the only surviving members of his family, Frenchie—a Métis teenager living in Canada and the story's protagonist and narrator—flees into the wilderness and begins to migrate north where he hopes to find remaining tribes and avoid being killed in a residential school. He is eventually taken in by a small band of travelers that consists of Miig, a one-time acquaintance of Frenchie's father; Minerva, a female elder versed in the old ways; and other young people, including Rose, a biracial teenager with whom Frenchie becomes romantically involved.

Similar to *The Hate U Give*, *The Marrow Thieves* depicts communal knowledge production as the best way to prepare people to resist neoliberalism's valuing of individualism and competition within structural racism. As the band led by Miig travels north, he tells his compatriots stories about both the climate-driven events that displaced Indigenous peoples and their historical oppression at the hands of white colonizers. It is through these stories that Frenchie and the reader learn about the ancestral importance of bone marrow. Miig tells the group that "dreams get caught in the webs woven in your bones. That's where they live, in that marrow there. […] You are born with them. Your DNA weaves them into the marrow like spinners" (18-19). His motivation to share the group's collective history through stories is driven by his desire "to set the memory in perpetuity," as well as his conviction that

acquiring knowledge of one's cultural history is "the only way to make the kinds of changes that [are] necessary to really survive" (25).

Frenchie also comes to understand the power of dreams and hope because of Minerva, an elder who proves to have saved the memory of all her dreams in her Indigenous language. When the Cardinals hook her to a machine designed to cull her dreams from her bone marrow, Minerva

> called on her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors. […] She sang with volume and pitch and a heartbreaking wail that echoed through her relatives' bones, […] morphing her singular voice to many, pulling every dream from her own marrow and into her song. (172)

With her song, her language, her dreams, and, most importantly, her reliance on her ancestors, Minerva causes the marrow-harvesting machine to explode. As a result, the harvesting system begins to collapse, inspiring a coalition of Indigenous resistance fighters that Frenchie's group eventually joins to continue their rebellion. Minerva's activism—relying as it does on language, stories, and dreams shared by her people—destroys the competitive, entrepreneurial commodification of the very lifeblood generated in her bone marrow. She becomes an activist inspired to action against neoliberalism because of her collectivist ideals.

The Marrow Thieves imagines a future in which neoliberalism's valuing of individualism and competition is taken to an extreme. In this dystopic Canada, individuals compete for water and other life-sustaining resources, so a logic of social Darwinism prevails, with the result that native peoples, outnumbered and overwhelmed, are driven from their lands, brutalized, exploited, and stripped of the dreams embedded in their marrow. The novel is clear in its insistence that such an outcome is attributable to a racialized system that values the lives of some people more than others. As Miig tells Frenchie, Indigenous peoples lost their value to the government after leaders ceased "car[ing] about long-range things like courting votes for the next election and instead

cared about things like keeping valued, wealthy community members safe" (88). Frenchie later learns that after scientists discovered the medical use of Indigenous peoples' bone marrow, they were commodified, hunted by Recruiters, and warehoused in processing facilities where they would await death.

In this world, Indigenous people's collectivism, rather than individualism, constitutes an antidote to neoliberal racial exploitation. A preadolescent at the time he is separated from his brother, Frenchie nearly perishes but manages to survive only because Miig and his companions happen upon him and nurse him back to health. In another example of their collectivism, when they track a deer that holds the promise of nourishment, Miig insists that they hunt individually, not for competition, but rather because he reasons that "work[ing] separately but together" is for the betterment of the group (45). When the group discovers an abandoned hotel in the forest, they are initially delighted by the prospect of sleeping in their own self-contained rooms. As the night wears on, however, they reject the privacy that arrangement affords them, choosing instead to make their way to Frenchie's room to be together and enjoy the comfort and safety that comes with being members of a group.

While *The Marrow Thieves* associates collectivism with security, it also cautions against overvaluing individual exceptionalism. When the band first reaches the hotel, they notice it is surrounded by an electric fence. Unsure whether the fence holds a current, Miig concludes that the only way to know for certain is for him to touch it. Recognizing Miig's value to the group as both a leader and a keeper of the group's stories, Frenchie intervenes, hurling himself against the fence before the older man reaches it. Although some of his companions compliment him for his bravery, Miig surprises Frenchie by scolding him for his selfishness, insisting, "No one is more important than anyone else, French. […] *No one should be sacrificed for anyone else*" (58, emphasis added). The book is thus clear in its ideological commitment to rejecting any system that holds some lives to be more valuable than others.

In direct contrast, by depicting the persecution of Indigenous peoples at the hands of the Recruiters, who function as the symbol of systemic

oppression in the novel, the book depicts stratification between races as a direct result of overemphasizing individualism, exceptionalism, and prioritizing characters who benefit from white privilege. The result is a society in which all people not only compete for the resources they need to survive but in which some groups of people become resources that others consume for their own personal advancement. As one character tells Frenchie, their non-native tormentors "don't think of us as humans, just commodities" (203).

At the conclusion of the book, after Frenchie and his companions are taken in by a small group of resistance fighters, he contemplates whether to remain with this new community or leave to pursue the promise of a better life in the north with Rose. Upon learning that scouts have discovered a group of newcomers in the area, however, he and Rose decide to stay. Later, they find out that one of the newcomers is Miig's former partner, a man who was thought to have died in a residential school, but who managed to escape. Moved by the couple's reunion, Frenchie reflects on the power of holding space for other people in one's life. He concludes:

> And I understood that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream. I understood just what we would do for each other, just what we would do for the ebb and pull of the dream, the bigger dream that held us all. Anything. Everything. (231)

Whereas Starr's activism in *The Hate U Give* sits comfortably alongside popular understandings of what activism entails, the activism that Frenchie and his community practice is distinctly quieter, albeit no less powerful for being so. By choosing to remain and be part of a community of people in a resistance movement that is committed to preserving their languages and culture in the face of genocidal forces, Frenchie follows in Minerva's path, ultimately becoming an activist himself.

Nevertheless, Frenchie is not the neoliberal hero who overthrows oppressive systems. Rather, at the end of the novel, he and his companions continue to exist in enforced isolation on the margins of society. The

machinations of racism grind on in the form of residential schools; loved ones remain lost and missing; racial stratification remains a reality. Yet, in keeping with the tradition of the critical dystopia, a type of dystopia in which characters reckon with the horrors of their social world while working toward something better (Moylan xii-xiii), *The Marrow Thieves* identifies unity, collaboration, and shared cultural memories as a potent recipe for activists to follow as they work to annihilate the seeds of destruction that neoliberalism sows.

Conclusion

Contemporary young adult protest novels such as *The Hate U Give* and *The Marrow Thieves* reject neoliberalism's valuing of hyper-individualism and competition in favor of collectivity and collaboration. In doing so, these books depict teenage protagonists whose knowledge of systemic oppression deepens as they interact with and learn from people in their local communities, for which they become advocates.

The activist impulses that we have described in these two YA protest novels are not new. They are part of a larger tradition, since adolescent literature in the U.S. and Canada has long been embedded in many social reform movements. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), with its anti-slavery reform agenda, includes two African American teenagers, Topsy and Emmeline, both of whom are depicted specifically to stir and engage readers' empathy, even though one is portrayed comically and the other pathetically. Subsequently, various bestselling, reform-oriented novels in the nineteenth century portrayed teenage protagonists confronting and responding to oppressive social forces, such as Alcott's *Little Women* (1868, 1869), Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). As Roberta Seelinger Trites has observed about the foundational authors of the U.S. adolescent reform novel:

> Whether the reform ideology in a text concerns itself with gender or race or politics or any other social issue, novels for adolescents written in the traditions established by Alcott

> and Twain communicate that adolescents can make a social difference. (143)

YA protest novels may be uniquely well-positioned to engage in subversive critiques of neoliberalism and other unjust systems of power while also advocating for progressive activist causes.

In academia, YA literature is often perceived as inferior to literature with a capital 'L,' and, as a result, the former rarely receives considerable critical attention. Ageist assumptions that depict the intended teenage audience for YA literature as less sophisticated readers than adults may also contribute to the genre's marginalization, which, in turn, allows for it to be subversive in ways that too often escape notice. Although traditional academics might not always take YA literature seriously enough, many teenagers do. As the anecdotes we shared at the beginning of this article attest, a growing number of young people are embracing books they grew up reading as if they were a blueprint for engaging in activism. In doing so, they learn to understand themselves as agentic people who have the capacity to resist neoliberal discourses, including those that perpetuate systemic oppression by emphasizing hyper-individualism and competition at the expense of collectivism and cooperation. By challenging teen readers to imagine more compassionate, more just forms of social organization, YA protest novels such as *The Hate U Give* and *The Marrow Thieves* position them to embrace hope as an alternative to despair and to resist neoliberal forces that seek to commodify all aspects of human life.

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Biography

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