

# Show and Tell

African-American writing and narratives as tools for change



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## Abstract

The aims of this thesis are to examine how race and racial issues are approached in *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward, how the writers approach the role of being African-American writers, and how the novels attempt to affect society through their narratives.

This will be done through first examining relevant theory. The focus will be on narratives and ideology, approaches to race, a look at the development of African-American writing and writers, and the current academic debate on the two novels. This will be followed by a close reading of the individual novels as well as a comparative reading of the novels.

In total, this will provide the basis for answering the research questions. Thomas has a more essentialist approach to race and follows Langston Hughes in the view that it is the responsibility of African-American writers to uplift African-American people, while Ward follows a constructivist perspective on race and although somewhat uplifting African-American people is more in line with Zora Neale Hurston's view of being a writer first. The portrayal of racial issues follows the perspective of race. The essentialist approach shows racial issues in a somewhat simplified version and in a vacuum, while a constructivist approach shows racial issues as interconnected with other social issues in a way that is more complex and multilevel and expecting a more thorough understanding from the reader. Thomas has written a novel aimed at educating a new generation toward political awakening. Ward's novel is less direct and instead shows the reader the issues present in society and expect them to see a need for change after being exposed to the complexity of existing issues that magnify each other.

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# Introduction

Literature serves many purposes in life and in society. It entertains, it connects, it inspires, and it has the potential to tell stories that affect society. Through literature authors are given the opportunity to change the world by telling the right story at the right time, inspiring a need for change in their readers. It is an opportunity for oppressed or marginalised groups in society to gain a voice and be heard when they are the ones most often excluded from the public debate and narrative.

Since the inception of the United States, race has held a particular importance in society and issues relating to racialised treatment of people has been rampant. Although the treatment of African-American people has improved over the centuries, they are still discriminated against, oppressed, and the victims of generations of systemic racism. The widespread Black Lives Matter demonstrations following several unjust killings of African-American people in recent years have shown the want and need for change in the status quo of the racialised US among large groups of the population.

This thesis will look at the meeting of literature and social issues, and how to change the status quo through challenging it in literature. This will be done by analysing how two specific novels are used in an attempt to achieve social change and how they approach race and racial issues. The first novel this thesis will base itself on is *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. First published in 2017, it has since become well known in popular culture and been a best seller. It is a Young Adult (YA) novel which has directly linked itself to the Black Lives Matter movement and is inspired by several shootings of unarmed African-American people. The second novel is *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward. It was first published in 2011 and was the first of two books from Ward to win the National Book Award. *Salvage the Bones* is aimed at a more mature audience and tackles several social issues, of which this thesis will focus on the issues connected to race. These novels are both written by African-American women about the lives of African-American girls as main characters, it will therefore be natural to explore how this affects how the novels are read. Both aim to have an effect towards change in society, but in different ways and targeted towards different groups, which will be explored in this thesis.

As a work from an outside perspective on the US and its approach to and issues with race, analysing a work of fiction outside of its original cultural context, as this thesis is doing, will possibly consciously or unconsciously have an effect on how it is analysed. For instance, Norway is a country where most of the political spectrum exists to the left of the US political

spectrum and where the type of patriotism common in the US would by some be considered nationalism. Both *The Hate U Give* and *Salvage the Bones* are works that aim to challenge the dominant ideology of the society within which they were formed, the outside perspective of not belonging within said dominant ideology might have some impact on the analysis of the texts. Even so, US culture has such a dominant role within Western society that it has enabled an intellectual understanding of the culture which should be sufficient for a fair analysis in this thesis.

The purpose of this thesis is to answer the following research questions in relation to the selected novels; (1) How are racial issues faced by the main characters portrayed in the YA novel versus in the adult fiction novel? (2) How do Thomas and Ward approach race in their respective novels, and how do they approach their own role as African-American writers? (3) In what way do Thomas and Ward aim to affect society through *The Hate U Give* and *Salvage the Bones*?

To answer these questions this thesis will explore necessary theory and carry out close readings and analysis. First, the thesis will look at the functions of narratives and their ability to affect society. Further, it will go into some of the history of African-American writing and differing views on potential responsibility when writing as an African-American. The current debate around the novels will be examined. There will be performed close reading of the novels individually. Finally, there will be a comparative analysis of the novels in relation to the theory, and through this the thesis will be able to answer the research questions.



# 1. Narratives as Challengers of Ideology

In order to connect the novels to the society surrounding them it is necessary to examine what role narratives play in society. Both the novels this thesis bases itself on are works of fiction and neither claims to be anything else. Still, both *The Hate U Give* and *Salvage the Bones* have a clear aim of saying something about society. While Angie Thomas has openly taken inspiration from the Black Lives Matter movement and the history of the Civil Rights movement, Jesmyn Ward has taken her inspiration from her own background in the poor areas of Mississippi and the very real catastrophe of hurricane Katrina. The novels are based strongly in real life events and have been shaped by the society in which they were created. The question then is how do these texts aim to influence society in return? To answer the question, one first has to look at the functions of narratives and how any form of narrative can affect society.

## Narratives

We are surrounded by different forms of narratives in our lives, whether we are aware of it or not. There are the obvious forms of narratives, such as films, tv-shows and books, but also many more subtle forms. A song often tells a narrative, the news is full of narratives of what is going on in the world, any subject whether it be history or biology aim to tell a narrative about what is being studied, or simply a friend telling the story of what they did over the weekend. A narrative can be defined as “a series of events in a specific order – with a beginning, a middle and an end” (Bennett & Royle 2016; 55). Or perhaps an even simpler definition would be that of Barbara Herrnstein Smith, narrative is “someone telling someone else that something happened” (1980; 232). When approaching narrative according to these simple definitions it may become clearer how much of our lives and society that is impacted by all types of narratives and how many narratives we are exposed to every day. We are used to being affected by narratives, but the majority of us are likely not conscious of how and to what extent we are affected.

Understanding that narratives do in fact have such a prevalent role in our lives, it is natural to ask ourselves why they have this role and why it seems to be such a basic human trait to seek them out. For us to both have an individual urge as well as a societal need to seek out narratives, it must serve a purpose for us on several different levels. Firstly, the purpose of narrative for the individual. J. Hillis Miller argues that one of the most important purposes of narratives is to help us make sense of our experience of the world, and we need the same

types of narratives over and over to reinforce that sense making (1995; 70). Narratives present an understanding of the world and may explain why it is so, which in turn helps the individual build their own understanding of the world weighted in that of others. The human experience without narratives would be a lonely one, it is through narratives that we connect with other people and understand how our own experiences relates to theirs. By reading, watching or listening to narratives we learn how others relate to and experience the world and gain understanding of it. It can be as simple as sharing an experience with someone and having it validated through their narrative of the situation. Or, as it can be argued is often the case, by listening to narratives of people with different experiences to your own and through them making sense of a situation you may not initially relate to. For instance, the war in Ukraine looks very different from inside the country to anywhere else in the world, through listening to the narratives of the people there we make sense of and attempt to understand the situation.

The individual can never be truly separate from some form of society, the narrative has functions and purposes for the individual but will always be connected to and serve functions and purposes for society. As has been established, there are many forms of narrative, but this thesis focuses on the fictional narrative. The fictional narrative can also come in many forms, e.g. films, plays or books, all of which are often placed within the category of culture. This categorisation is for good reason. Narratives play an important part in creating and shaping our culture. In fact, fictional narratives often do not simply mirror culture, but creates the culture while simultaneously acting as the police of the culture, “fiction keep us in line and tend to make us more like our neighbours” (Hillis Miller 1995; 69). Fiction becomes a tool that helps solidify the position of the dominant culture. Within a society many narratives hold a special significance, these are often the narratives connected to core values of the dominant ideology and culture. There are some narratives that are retold over and over again, either in the same form or in variations of the same narrative. People being exposed to the same narrative over and over helps assert the dominant ideology of the culture (Hillis Miller 1995; 72). An example in the US is the story of the American hero saving the day against an outside threat either at home or abroad, a typical narrative that helps build the US culture of patriotism. Regardless of most other factors, every American is exposed to this narrative in some shape or form, an example would be the existence of Captain America who has repeatedly told variations of this story from 1941 to present day. The repetition of this narrative helps create a unified experience on which to build culture.

## **Ideology and Culture**

Narratives are shaped by, and aim to affect ideology and culture, but to further understand this one needs to look further into the concept of ideology. Ideology and culture are interconnected and for any society to maintain the status quo, ideology and culture needs to be replicated to include as much of the population as possible within the dominant ideology. This is closely connected to Louis Althusser's thoughts on Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), with fictional narratives falling into the category of Cultural ISA. According to Althusser an ISA is a distinct and specialised institution, in this case cultural, which upholds and reproduces the current ideology and culture of a society to maintain the power of the dominant ideology (Althusser 2018; 1291). Fictional narratives can be argued to both be a tool for other cultural ISAs and a cultural ISA on its own, but this view is dependent on the perspective one has on text. If the text is seen as an independent entity that can hold meaning beyond the intentions of the author and that meaning varying based on its context, this supports the argument that fictional narratives can also operate as Cultural ISA. If the text is seen as dependent on the author and the society in which it was shaped to hold meaning, it instead becomes a tool of ISA. Cultural ISA can act as an aid to the dominant ideology by normalising its way of thinking within society. Fictional narratives can either do this independently or as a tool, depending on the approach to the text.

Ideology works on everyone within a society through a social process which, like other social processes, works on the person regardless of whether they are aware of and understand it or not (Kavangah 1995; 311). The fictional narrative is further created by someone who themselves are affected by the dominant culture and ideology and other common narratives within the culture, which aids in the self-affirmative nature of ideology. Narratives and literature are part of the discourse within society, this can be in support of radical change as well as in favour of the conservative status quo (Chambers 1991; 13). Although narratives can challenge the dominant ideology, they can also be used to reproduce it. These narratives often tell the story of how the dominant ideology became the dominant ideology and in doing so strengthens its dominant position. However, the position of art is twofold. Although the author and the narrative may reproduce dominant ideology, they can also challenge it. This is dependent on the role of their art in society and which ideology it promotes.

The theories on reproduction of ideology through institutions, like culture and fictional narratives, that expose the people to the dominant ideology, it can be argued, does not fully

take into account that the population is not a monolith. Although most narratives and the laws of genres are shaped by the dominant ideology, every society has people or groups of people that does not fit into the standard. This could be through belonging to minorities or any groups considered the ‘other’ in society, or through holding different ideological beliefs. The US standard is generally considered to be the straight white man, anyone not in this category falls within different variations of the ‘other’. A society with different groups of ‘others’ also by extension often includes different ideologies and cultures. One way to do this may be through people bringing their heritages into society. African-American people and other minority groups have their own unique cultures. Living in the US they are forced to navigate the dominant culture while working to maintain their own if they do not wish to lose it. In the case of African-American people it is likely the development of their culture is a process of several factors over a significant amount of time along with their unique history within the US. People and groups of people can vary vastly and therefore many may also find themselves in society but without a sense of belonging to the dominant ideology or culture, but rather have their own ideology and culture. This may lead to people wishing to challenge and change the societal ideology and culture.

Some societies limit the possibilities for the non-dominant ideology to be heard and have a chance to impact the culture, but the US is not one of the countries with strict censorship and has some freedoms of publishing some other countries do not allow. For instance, the opportunity for self-publishing. Some books are sometimes censored or banned in certain arenas, such as *The Hate U Give* being censored in some schools or school districts for a period of time (Mashall Libraries 2021), freedom of speech holds a relatively strong position in the US. This makes it possible for voices of those falling within the category of ‘other’ who do not follow the dominant ideology to also be heard, although they can face additional barriers to achieve this. These narratives then serve a different purpose than to uphold the existing dominant ideology and culture.

### **The Power of Oppositional Narratives**

Instead of merely being a way of reaffirming and reproducing the dominant ideology, fictional narratives can also be a way of challenging the dominant ideology. Fictional narratives produced by society’s ‘others’ or that tell the stories of those who fall within these categories are a way of making their voices heard. Narratives having the power to create and reproduce ideology and culture for the dominant ideology must by extension also mean they

have the power to create and recreate ideology and culture for other non-dominant ideologies or to challenge the existing dominant ideology. Ross Chambers claims that oppositional narrative “merely exploits that structure of power for purposes of its own. But oppositional narrative in exploiting the narrative situation discovers a power, not to change the essential structure of narrative situations, but to *change its other* (the ‘narratee’ if on will)” (Chambers 1991; 11). In Chamber’s line of thinking, by staying within the established rules of the different forms of narrative, the non-dominant ideology and culture can use the same tools that have been used to affirm the dominant ideology and culture to challenge the narratee’s perception of it.

Freedom of speech and freedom for anyone to publish their narratives is a way of giving the opportunity of power to anyone: “To tell a story is to exercise power” (Chambers 1984; 50). Fictional narratives, and all forms of narratives, have the ability to affect society because being able to tell a story is a way to exercise power to influence how the world and society is seen through the eyes of the people. In the current war in Ukraine there are two alternative world views fighting for dominance: The West seeing Russia as an aggressor who unprovoked attacked a neighbouring country, and the official Russian version who see themselves as liberators of their suppressed neighbours and protecting themselves from possible future attacks. By controlling the story being told one can affect the opinion of large groups of people who are exposed to that narrative. This power of narrative also extends to fictional narratives, as is the focus of this thesis. Fictional narratives as a way of challenging the dominant ideology and culture is exercising power by telling the story of the ‘others’ of society and making sure the narrative is being told from their perspective in an effort to affect society.

For some groups in society, narrative may be one of the only ways to make their voices heard and exercise any form of power. People falling within the ‘other’ group in society often hold little to no other power and may feel weak when faced with the challenge of going against groups of people who are more in line with the dominant ideology and culture and therefore hold more power. Narrative power may, in some cases, be one of the only strategies left for those dispossessed and weak in society in fighting for change. Narrative power as oppositional behaviour has the “potential to change states of affairs, by changing people’s ‘mentalities’ (their ideas, attitudes, values and feelings (...)), a potential that is not available to ‘other’ forms of oppositional practice” (Chambers 1991; 1). For those in society that fall within non-dominant groups and particularly those that are sometimes in direct opposition to the dominant ideology and culture, narratives and the power the act of

storytelling gives may be the only access to power they have (Chambers 1991; 3), and thus their only tool available in the attempt to challenge the dominant culture and ideology.

One may ask why is it that narratives holds this special role of sometimes being the only form of power the weak and oppressed in society has access to. Narratives, and fictional narratives in the case of this thesis, “are a relatively safe or innocuous place in which the reigning assumptions of a given culture can be criticized” (Hillis Miller 1995; 69). Unlike most other forms of challenge to the dominant ideology and culture, narratives enable anyone to say anything without having to literally stick their neck out. George Orwell’s *1984* has had a significant influence on the world and the discourse and perception of totalitarian regimes, Orwellian becoming a well-known term, his narrative changed the world but without risking his own life or health. Some of the biggest changes to societies in history has changed through revolutions, the US revolution, or the French, or the Russian, each came with a very real risk to the lives, health and general wellbeing of those seeking change and forcing many to take arms. Protests or demonstrations are seen as safer ways to seek change than through armed revolution, but this also comes with several personal risks for those willing to participate. One need not look further than the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, directly connected to *The Hate U Give*, to see these risks. A protest against police violence towards African-Americans may run the risk of violence from both those who disagree with any change in the status quo of US society, as well as from the police themselves. Kyle Rittenhouse’s actions and his subsequent acquittal as well as the militarised response from police to Black Lives Matter protests throughout the US show the general unsafety even initially peaceful protests and protestors with no intention of encountering violence risk. The lasting impact of these protest have so far been less than Orwell’s writing, despite its significant risks. Narratives, however, allows the author to challenge the dominant ideology and culture in a relatively safe way. A book can be destroyed, but the author generally tends to be safe, at least in comparison with other forms of challenge to the status quo and especially in countries that value free speech. The challenge a narrative gives to the dominant ideology can outlive the individual, allowing it to contribute in pushing for change for generations instead of in an instance.

Narrative power as the only form of power may be especially true for groups of people that may be victims of different forms and degrees of direct or indirect oppression by the dominant ideology and culture. Racism and racial oppression being as prevalent as they are in US society today must be because something in the dominant culture accepts and/or encourages it. African-Americans fall clearly into the category of ‘other’ in US society and

have both throughout the nation's history and today been systematically oppressed. Although they have gained other forms of power, narrative power has historically been important for their ability to affect society. Going back to the first slave narratives telling the story of the horrors they were put through from their own perspective, such as the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, the power of narrative was a tool in fighting slavery and other oppression. Through storytelling slaves who had been seen as less than human were given the opportunity to regain their humanity in the eyes of some of their oppressors and help change the ideology of people to aid in their liberation (Olney 1991; 154). The slave narratives were the very beginning of African-Americans using narrative power to change society. Although African-Americans have thankfully gained much in every sense since then, they are still very much the 'other' in US society and still victims of systematic oppression and mistreatment. Narrative power continues to be one of the tools used by African-Americans and others in going against the dominant ideology and culture which oppresses 'others', which this thesis will show.

### **Importance of the Author**

When it comes to African-American literature it is necessary to connect the author and the text. Some argue the text is completely independent of any author and need to be read as such, while others deem the author to a vital part to any reading. To Foucault, the author is inevitable and necessary to connect to the text. The author has the function "to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (Foucault 2018; 1400) and were the text to not be connected with the author, Foucault argues the main question in any discourse would be who was speaking (Foucault 2018; 1409). Any text that is published with the purpose of being read has the potential and likelihood to be part of public discourse, and with this function of the text Foucault here argues that the author is important to the discourse. Who the author is and their role in society is important to how their text is received and seen within the public discourse. A novel that deals heavily with issues of unwanted pregnancy and illegal abortion, written by a woman in a time when abortion was illegal is vital to its weight in public discourse. The same text written by a man in modern times where legal abortion is common would not have the same weight or role in public discourse. The author is a "historical figure in which a series of events converge" (Foucault 2018; 1403). The context of time, place and which society the text is impacted by is thus

closely connected to the author and necessary for the sense making the narrative contributes to.

In some cases, the demography of the author influences the reading of the text. A text being authored by an African-American woman may carry different connotations than a text being written by a white man. The authors of both novels relevant to this thesis are African-American women writing about experiences of African-American girls. This leads to the concept of author authenticity, which can be “used as an allegedly accurate measure of the validity of the representation of subjectivity” (Sánchez-Acre 2007; 141) Some would argue against focusing too heavily on author authenticity. An over emphasis on authenticity has the potential to limit what the authors can successfully publish due to expectations of the type of text they should write (Sánchez-Acre 2017; 143). As this thesis focuses on specific novels and the effect of author authenticity on them, this is less relevant. Instead, the authenticity of the authors gives a stronger validity to their representation of the experience of facing the racial issues they raise in their novels.

Bringing the concept of the meeting of author and reader in the text back to the functions and purpose of fictional narratives, this meeting is where ideology and culture is created and reproduced. The author can attempt to affect society through their text of fictional narrative, but it is only when it is read that the author and the reader together can either reproduce the dominant ideology and culture or can challenge the status quo.



# 1. Perceptions of Race

The concept of race is in many ways an integral part of US society. When an American is asked the question “what are you?”, the answer may very well be which racial groups or pre-US immigration nation they identify with. This is however likely not the case for people of other nationalities being asked the same question. Despite its strong position within US society, people’s understanding of and approach to the concept of race still differs widely. Two theoretical approaches to race that is relevant to the discussion of this thesis are essentialism and constructivism.

## Essentialism

The first approach that will be discussed in this thesis is that of essentialism. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* defines essentialism as “meaning the true or permanent nature of being of a phenomenon, as opposed to accidents that may befall it.” (2001; 115). In relation to identity and race this means that one’s racial background and heritage is a true and permanent aspect of a person that cannot be changed. Thus, an African-American person is, has always been and will always be an African-American person and it is a foundational part of the person’s identity that is indisputable and unchangeable. An essentialist approach to race involves a labelling of all people, meaning all African-American people are seen as being primarily African-American rather than individuals. Among people within a given group this approach can aid in community building and creating common goals for bettering of conditions for this group of people. For the larger society and within politics the effect is likely to be different. Seeing all people as inherently belonging to a race and creating identities based on that race can lead to a view of “us-versus-them” in society and politics. With a majority of the population and those with political power belonging to one specific racial group, essentialism opens up further potential for racist views through viewing all individuals as one entity based on common inherent traits. Essentialism in relation to race places every person as belonging in locked and unchangeable social categories, which in turn affects their view of the world and how others view them.

As humans we categorise most things around us either consciously or subconsciously, we see an animal in the field and categorise it as a sheep or we categorise the people we surround ourselves with as family, friend, acquaintance etc. According to Newman and Knobe “one important function of essentialism (if not *the* most important function) is that it provides a basis for categorization” (Newman & Knobe 2019; 590). Essentialism helps us

categorise our surroundings. Some suggest that “essentialism may arise out of a more general tendency to assume that associations in the world are due to inherent, rather than external factors” (Newman & Knobe 2019; 600). It is easier to assume that anything one observes is due to an inherent trait in the observed subject rather than caused by external factors, as this would involve having to relate to more factors. When applied in relation to race and other social categories, essentialising these categories is according to research within social psychology one of the stronger predictors of stereotyping (Newman & Knobe 2019; 595). This means that this type of categorisation may help in building community and social unity within groups, as this form of categorisation through essentialism creates commonalities between members of the social category that become inescapable, but also creates a foundation for prejudice against others based on the categorisation.

## **Constructivism**

In strong contrast to essentialism is constructivism, the idea that the reality of our society is built through ideational concepts created by people over long periods of time. Saurugger explains that “constructivist hold the view that the building blocks of reality are ideational as well as material. Ideational factors have normative as well as instrumental dimensions and not only express individual but collective intentionality” (Saurugger 2014; 146). By ideational factors is meant that we categorise the world through our ideas of the world. Through these ideas we, as in a society of collective people, create a norm within which we place everything around us as well as use these ideas in an attempt to place everything in categories that match our preconceived ideas. Social constructs are foundational in the building of society and function as a framework for how individuals and people as a whole within a given society understand the world. These are built over long periods of time, generations, and include a vast amount of people. The norms these constructs dictate influence the actions and beliefs of the people living within them. These constructs are so foundational to society that they cannot be undone, but this thesis will argue they can be pushed toward gradual change.

Using a constructivist approach to the concept of race means viewing race as an ideational construct created by people and society rather than an inherent natural aspect of an individual, social group or humanity. Constructivism is thus in strong contrast to essentialism. Constructivist literature argues that people are “more influenced by social norms in their actions and behaviour than by any weighing up of the costs and benefits of a particular course

of action” (Saurugger 2014; 147). The norms shape the opinions of both the individual and the society as a whole. The opinion and strong position of race in the US is shaped by social norms developed over the centuries since the first European colonisation of the land and their relationship to the native people already living there.

Constructivism is built on the notion that people interpret their world through certain social constructs and based on their adoption of said constructs arrive at certain actions (Parsons 2018; 90). Any action connected to race is thus according to constructivism based on the social construct of race. This means by extension that any action related to race, such as racism, is based on the social norms within a given society. Having an issue of systemic racism in a nation would from a constructivist perspective be because the social norms of the society accepts and/or encourages racism in various extent.

### **Affecting Society**

In this thesis the focus is on how the novels may use their approach to race as a social concept in an attempt to affect society. For essentialism this would mean altering the perception of an existing and inherent racial group. In regard to constructivism, it follows the notion that the ideational building blocks of society are created by people, Craig Parsons argues then that “though changing it may be difficult, it is imaginable that we can remake it” (Parsons 2018; 83). The idea of important building blocks of society being social constructs also removes any deterministic element of society, if it is based on a social construct that means “*it did not have to be this way*” (Ibid.). Along the road toward creating the current society there were other possibilities. In line with Parsons, current day society is not the culmination of everything society will be, but rather a step in its development. Continuing this thinking then extends to the idea that the current societal construct, though quite monolithic in its current form, can be pushed towards change in different directions over time. This would, at least in theory, make it possible to challenge the concept of race and lessen the role it plays in US society over time by pushing the development of the social construct of race in a given direction.

### **3. Writing as an African-American**

#### **Slave Narratives**

The history of African-American writing is an extensive one and the role and form of writing has changed, often in accordance with the role of African-American people in US society. Although already carrying rich traditions of oral narratives, it was slave narratives that started the history of published African-American writing. During slavery very few African-Americans were allowed any form of literacy, limiting their ability to communicate their stories with the world around them. The publishing of slave narratives allowed African-American people to tell their stories and helped those white people open to it gain understanding of their situation.

The very first slave narratives did not have much effect on public opinion however. It was not until narratives were published in connection with the abolitionist movement with the aid of white abolitionists in the 1840s and 1850s that the narratives started to agitate and transform public opinion (Gould 2011; 49). The position of African-Americans in society at the time was in worst case enslaved and in best case a free person living in a white supremacist society. Any and all opportunities were extremely limited and completely dependent on the will and support of white people. In order to tell their narratives and achieve any goals African-Americans therefore had to ally themselves with white abolitionists, both in the US and in the UK, and work together within a 'culture' where the white people were generally in charge (Gould 2011; 49-50). Despite this precarious situation to even publish the narratives, some of them became hugely popular. Their popularity was likely partly a result of their generic diversity and their ability to appeal to multiple different audiences simultaneously (Gould 2011; 50). From the perspective of someone who was part of the white majority the stories of travelling by night, escaping captivity and running towards the freedom of the North could seem like interesting stories rather than gruesome realities. Or they could awaken a sympathy for a group of people who were seen as less than white people by society, and by many as less than human.

The purpose of slave narratives was very clear. Although autobiographical in form, telling the story of a single individual, slave narratives told similar stories. It could be argued this was in order to conform to the expectations of the white population and the white abolitionist on which the slave narrative's chance of being heard was dependent, and it is likely this was at least partially true. However, another reason why slave narratives shared significant similarities was because they shared a purpose and aimed to bring forward the

same truth; the truth of the horrors of slavery and to then bring about the abolition of slavery (Olney 1991; 154). Many narratives also did not simply stop when the person became free, but continued to show the difficulty of trying to build a life as an African-American person and communities for African-Americans in a white supremacy society (Ernest 2011; 99-100). The political goal of affecting society to better the conditions for African-Americans was the main purpose for these narratives, both to free those enslaved in the south and those trying to live as free African-Americans in all of the US.

A significant amount of slave narratives were published, but not all were actually written by slaves. Due to the lack of opportunities for literacy among the escaped or formerly enslaved people at the time, many had to instead tell their story orally and have it written down by a white abolitionist who wanted to help. Whether consciously or not, having someone else actually writing the narrative is likely to have impacted the storytelling in some way. There were also a few cases of either actual or fictional slave narratives being written by white people who claimed it had been written by an African-American (Ernest 2011; 92). These were factors that made it important to have narratives that were in fact written by African-Americans who had once been enslaved and that the narratives could be authenticated as such. At the time, this was often done by having extensive prefaces or appendices written by white abolitionists who were public figures and could therefore vouch for the authenticity of the narrative (ibid.). Two famous and significant writers of slave narratives who both wrote their own narratives and whose authenticity was established at the time were Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.

### **Frederick Douglass**

Frederick Douglass is perhaps the most famous writer within the genre of slave narratives. In fact, he wrote several slave narratives in his life in addition to other writing and editorial work. The first and perhaps most well-known of his narratives was *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. This slave narrative is seen by some as “the most significant example of the dynamic connection between the development of African American literature and the abolitionist movement” (Ernest 2011; 92). The narrative is directly connected to the political movement towards abolitionism at the time, as was Douglass himself. The dynamic connection between the two meant they were both affecting each other, the narrative was influenced by the movement and in turn its existence and content influenced the movement.

Both the narrative and Douglass himself were closely connected to the abolitionist movement, the very *raison d'être* for the narrative as a published work can be argued to be the movement itself. The narrative functioned as a way for Douglass to authenticate his voice and in turn the antislavery speeches he frequently made (Ernest 2011; 94). In doing so he not only documented his own experiences as an enslaved person who escaped but also further extended his efforts in aiding the abolitionist cause (Ernest 2011; 91). Through his storytelling Douglass took part in a political movement and deliberately attempted to change the society he was born into.

Douglass was very clear on his goals for changing society and how he wanted to contribute to it. At the very end of *Narrative* he writes, “from that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren”, a case he would continue to plead for over fifty years (Levine 2017; 996). In combination with his work as an orator and with newspapers, his slave narratives functioned as a tool with which he could perform some power in an attempt to affect society in favour of his cause to better the conditions for African-American people. His narrative sold over 30 000 copies and became a best seller (Levine 2017; 998). Not all copies were sold in the US, but within societies that were all heavily white supremacist. Despite his circumstances he became known as one of the greatest orators of his time and a great African-American leader. It may have helped his esteem in the eyes of the white population that he had high respect for the US constitution and viewed it as an antislavery document, building up the US ideals of themselves as an egalitarian nation (Levine 2017; 999). Instead of fighting against the basic principles of the US, he wanted to use them to his advantage and cooperate with white allies to fight to dismantle the obstacles African-Americans faced in slavery and racism. By doing this in his writing and speeches he used the foundations of the dominant ideology to challenge it and the people within it through his narratives.

The importance of Frederick Douglass in the fight for African-American people is difficult to exaggerate. In his work he valued sympathetic bonds between black and white people and saw it as necessary to achieve change. And not only did he fight the oppression of African-Americans, but he objected to all forms of discrimination (Levine 2017; 1000). This included objecting to the oppression of women and viewing white women as an important ally and a force within the fight for abolition and against oppression of African-Americans. His abilities as a writer, orator and leader are still admired today. It is his slave narratives and the

effect they had on society that has helped keep Douglass as an important figure and role model in the US consciousness.

## **Harriet Jacobs**

The very first American slave narrative written by a woman was written by Harriet Jacobs, a contemporary of Frederick Douglass. She had also escaped enslavement in the South, but unlike Douglass who published his first narrative with his name in the title, Jacobs published under the pseudonym “Linda Brent” (Levine 2017; 879). For her the importance was for her narrative to be told, she was not building authenticity for abolitionist speeches. The purpose of her text was still very much antislavery. Jacobs was involved in the abolitionist movement, but in a different way from orator Douglass. She in fact worked in the Anti-Slavery Office and Reading Room directly above the office of one of Douglass’s antislavery newspaper at one point, in addition to being active in philanthropic and reform work during and after the US Civil War (Ernest 2011; 99). The nature of the genre of slave narrative in itself shows the political aims behind Jacobs’s published narrative, highlighted by her own involvement in the abolitionist movement.

In her virtue of being a woman, Jacobs wrote a narrative that showed the difficulty uniquely faced by the enslaved women that had been somewhat ignored in the narratives of enslaved men. As an African-American enslaved woman in the very patriarchal and white supremacist US where she was in every sense of the word seen as property until she escaped to freedom, Jacobs had to endure the added danger of white men’s lust that was not faced in the same way by the enslaved men. Like Douglass, Jacobs saw white women as potential allies and a force it would be beneficial to have on the abolitionists’ side. Through the writing and publishing of her narrative

Jacobs wanted to contribute her life story to the abolitionist cause in a way that would capture the attention of Northern white women in particular to show them how slavery debased and demoralized women, at once subjecting them to white male lust and also depriving them of the right to make homes for their families (Levine 2017; 878-879).

At a time where sex outside of marriage was seen as completely immoral and the sanctity of the family as a foundational building block of US society, Jacobs appealed to these basic values of white women in an attempt to gain their support for the abolitionist movement.

One of the important ways slave narratives worked was to create sympathy for those suffering under enslavement, especially from white people who could help in the abolishment of slavery, Jacobs wanted more than just sympathy. During her time as a slave one of the

issues Jacobs faced was the sexual threats of her slave owner and the responding anger of his wife. As a way of defending herself from this treatment Jacobs got involved with a white man and had two children with him (Levine 2017; 878). This was an act of bravery, as her fate rested entirely in the hands of the man to whom she was enslaved. By including this in her narrative, Jacobs aimed to achieve more in addition to sympathy from her story; “she sought to win the respect and admiration of her readers for the courage with which she forestalled abuse and for the independence with which she chose a lover rather than having one forced on her” (Levine 2017; 879). In sharing this part of her story, she both appeals to these women’s values of family and virtue, but also aims to gain respect for how she in her own way stands up against the patriarchal aspects of slavery.

### **Authentic Narratives**

Both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs wrote their narratives themselves, they had both been fortunate enough to gain literacy, but both faced struggles when publishing. Douglass was seen as too eloquent and intelligent to have ever been a slave, which was why he needed to publish his narrative in order to authenticate his voice when speaking on abolitionist subjects. When he was first published he had to have a preface written by a white abolitionist to authenticate his story, but by the time of his second narrative he was able to have a preface by an African-American abolitionist and physician instead as he was already authenticated. Jacobs, however, struggled to even find a white person to aid in the publishing of her story without them wanting to undermine Jacobs’s authority in determining the essential elements of her own story (Ernest 2011; 98). Despite both Douglass and Jacobs being literate enough to write the narratives and both of them actively involved in the abolition movement, they were dependent on white allies to be able to publish in their own words and being seen as authentic.

Douglass, Jacobs and all other authentic sources of slave narratives used their narratives with a clear aim of affecting US society in a way that benefitted African-American people. They used their narrative power in a way that challenged the existing dominant ideology of white supremacy in a pragmatic way in collaboration with white allies. The narratives humanised and uplifted African-American people in the eyes of the white majority from less than human, and in many cases chattel, to people worthy of listening to and whose freedom they should support. The tradition of slave narratives shaped much of the African-American writing that followed and still stands as an example of “the determination to put literary art to work to realize the practical value of an aesthetic model that finds lasting value



in the effort to create not just timeless but also significantly timely literature” (Ernest 2011; 112). Slave narratives were the earliest examples in African-American writing of African-American people using literature and narratives as a way of uplifting African-Americans as a whole and to challenge and push society in the direction of change. The literature aims to be timeless, but also timely in relation to what else is going on in the US. It is the foundation which has shaped the African-American literature and art that followed, including novels.

### **Harlem Renaissance**

While slave narratives all shared one common goal in the bettering of conditions for African-Americans, in the following century the role of the African-American writer was more debated. Using different approaches to race, the question of the role and responsibility of African-American writers and artist became less clear cut. During the Harlem Renaissance Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, two prominent African-American writers, wrote about the role of the African-American artist and writing while black, each taking on opposing theoretical approaches to the subject of race.

### **Langston Hughes**

With a more essentialist approach on one side of the debate was Langston Hughes. In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” from 1926, Hughes takes his stand on what it means to be an African-American artist and the perspective he holds on what responsibility each African-American writer, like himself, holds to other African-American people. The standard for the American identity has always been the white man. This is true since the first colonisers arrived, and both before and after the words “all men are created equal” created the foundation for a nation, yet only included the white men similar to the founding fathers themselves. W.E.B. Du Bois’s double consciousness, which he described as “two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 2017; 563), based itself on the “otherness” of living as anything other than the standard American identity of the white man. In line with this Hughes criticised the seemingly inherent idea of white people and whiteness as better than those who fall into any “other” category, especially amongst African-Americans themselves.

This is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. (Hughes 2015)

Seeing African-Americans strive toward achieving what is, in Hughes' view, reaching towards whiteness is what is in fact hindering their own ability to achieve greatness. Hughes views a person's blackness as an essential and inherent part of the individual and identity. Denying one's own identity by striving for whiteness will make it impossible for any African-American person to create great art.

To see whiteness as better and as a virtue is taught behaviour going against the natural embrace of one's own race in Hughes's view. This type of behaviour is reserved for middle class African-American people who think they are too good for the majority of African-Americans. The majority of African-Americans does however embrace their blackness

These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were (...). They furnish a wealth of colourful, distinctive material for any artist because they hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization (Hughes 2015).

The individuality of an African-American person includes and is based on their belonging to the African-American people, it is according to Hughes an essential part of the individual and aiming for American standardisation is therefore useless. According to Hughes' essentialist view, an African-American person can never achieve American standardisation because their race is a foundational part of the person. Embracing one's own race is an advantage to any African-American artist, embracing one's own culture gives better opportunity for creating great art than striving for a culture where one will never truly belong. The road to produce great art would still be difficult and the mountain high, but it would be impossible to achieve without embracing one's blackness (Hughes 2015). Being African-American is such an inherent part of the person it would be impossible to create great art without embracing their own person.

Embracing the African-American part of one's identity is not only to be able to create great art, it also comes with a responsibility to the African-American people

But to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering, "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro – and beautiful!" (Hughes 2015).

The African-American artist holds a responsibility to his people to uplift their race. Instead of striving for the ideal of white people or to be compared to white artists the African-American artist should use their art to uplift the status of African-Americans and improve the way in which African-American people are viewed and the conditions they face. The aim is for the

artist to climb the mountain and for both artist and the African-American people to stand on the top of the mountain “free within ourselves” (Hughes 2015). This is, according to Hughes, a responsibility all African-American artists have, to use their voice to uplift the African-American people as a whole, and not just aim for their own uplifting as an individual in the eyes of the standardised white America.

Hughes’ thinking is very much in line with essentialist views of race as an inescapable foundational aspect of the person. He was however not in line with the potential essentialist view of African-Americans as inferior, instead he uses the essentialist perspective to reverse this to show the beautiful and artistic sides of being African-American. Using the same essentialist approach that holds the potential for white supremacy he instead uses it to uplift African-American people.

### **Zora Neale Hurston**

One of Hughes’ biggest opponents of his view on race and the role of the African-American writer during the Harlem Renaissance was Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston’s essay “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” from 1928 both shows her constructivist views and why she holds them. As a child Hurston lived in an all-black town and the only white people she saw were the ones travelling through her town, she lived there until she turned thirteen when she moved to a bigger city, “I remember the very day that I became colored” (Hurston 2017; 958). In the absence of white people, her skin colour had not been important to her identity, “I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl” (Hurston 2017; 959). Rather than being a foundational part of her identity Hurston felt that being categorised as an African-American first removed her individual identity. A person only truly becoming African-American and having to use it as an identifier in the presence of white people, would categorise the concept of race as a social construct that only exists in the presence of social norms that expect its existence and importance.

The relationship Hurston has with the standardised America is complicated. While Hughes rebels against the perceived virtue of the white population over African-Americans, Hurston seems to have a more ambivalent relationship to both white people and her own role as an African-American. Unlike Hughes, Hurston has “no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored” (Hurston 2017; 960). This also goes very much against Du Bois’ thoughts of double consciousness. Hurston sees no antithesis between her roles as African-American and an American citizen. This is part of her ambivalence to the white

American standard. She is simultaneously aware that there is a divide between her experiences and those of the white population. In her essay Hurston illustrates this through the experience of a jazz concert. Although she and the white man next to her are both witnessing the same event, their experience of it is not the same, “he has only heard what I felt” (Hurtson 2017; 960). Although her race is a social construct and not an essential part of her identity, it does affect her and how she experiences the world around her. There is a tension between how Hurston approaches race generally and in the illustration of this moment. It could be argued that what is hinted at as a potentially essentialist perspective in this example is instead Hurston explaining the effect of living within the current social construct that its consequences are inescapable regardless of perspective on race.

As a writer Hurston sees her role and the role of any African-American artist quite differently than Hughes. Rather than being an African-American first and an individual second, Hurston views herself as an individual first and not merely a representative of her race; “at certain times I have no race, I am *me*” (Hurston 2017; 960). As primarily an individual she can simply write whatever she wants to write and not focus on the impact it would have on the perception of African-Americans as a whole. While Hughes felt that every African-American writer has a responsibility to uplift their race, Hurston saw no need. “Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me” (Hurston 2017; 960). As she acknowledges that some do discriminate her and other African-Americans, she simultaneously argues that this is not a problem to suffer from. Instead it is a problem for the people who willingly lose the company and community of her and people like her. In Hurston’s eyes, African-American people are already uplifted and therefore do not need to be further uplifted by her or her art. Discriminating against African-Americans rather than being allies and friends of African-Americans is by Hurston considered a loss by those foolish enough to choose it.

For Hurston one has a choice of whether to let one’s race define the future or not. “No, I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (Hurston 2017; 959). She could look behind her to the past and weep at all her ancestors and race has been through, but instead she is looking forward at a world that is her oyster, she is ready to embrace the opportunities that lay before her that previous generations did not have. Instead of seeing the history of African-American people as a disadvantage she wants to use it to her own advantage; “the game of keeping what one has is never so exiting as the game of getting” (Hurston 2017, 959). Hurston then sees it as somewhat of an advantage to come from little

and aim for achieving what has previously been impossible. Instead she almost pities the white people who are constantly living in fear of disappointing their ancestors by losing what previous generations built.

### **African-American Writers and Race**

Hughes and Hurston strongly exemplify the two opposing theoretical approaches to race. The changed role of African-Americans in US society allowed for this debate of where African-American writers should go next. Unlike for African-Americans in the abolitionist movement, there was no longer simply one aim for all African-American writing. The disagreement came down to whether African-American writers had to continue to use their narrative power to uplift African-American people, or if they could now write as individual writers first rather than representatives of a community. The whole discussion of the role of the African-American artist, their responsibility and individuality vs. race all depends on the larger discussion of different approaches to the concept of race. Both the theoretical approaches of essentialism and constructivism as well as the exemplifications of the approaches by Hughes and Hurston will be used throughout this thesis in attempt to answer the research questions regarding the two contemporary novels, *The Hate U Give* and *Salvage the Bones*.

## 4. Current debate on *The Hate U Give* and *Salvage the Bones*

Before continuing into analysing the books, it is necessary to examine the existing academic debate on the novels. As both novels are contemporary, the debate surrounding them is very current. Examining the debate surrounding each individual book will help strengthen the analysis of each book, but also the comparative analysis.

### *The Hate U Give*

The novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas has gained a lot of attention both within academia as well as in the general public. It was on the New York Times Best Seller list for over 80 weeks, was turned into a film, has become a popular book in English lessons in many countries, and has been the subject of several peer reviewed articles. The current debate in academia around the novel is unsurprisingly around its role as an antiracist novel, and the novel itself connects it to the Black Lives Matter movement. Vincent Haddad focuses on this connection between the movement and the novel, while Adam Levin focuses more generally on the novel's portrayal of a group often ignored in public antiracist discourse. Haddad is critical of the portrayal of police, black people committing crimes, and the relationship between the two within the novel, as well as what he calls a lack of intersectionality due to an absence of LGBTQ+-representation. Levin instead focuses on how the novel approaches the existing issue of African-American women being ignored in the public discourse and argues that the focus on giving this group a voice is in itself including intersectionality.

### **Empathy and Real-Life**

Haddad analyses the connection between the novel and Black Lives Matter, outlining “what different and successful forms the BLM novel can and should adopt” (Haddad 2018; 40). His focus is on how the novel relates to this specific movement rather than to antiracism in general. Haddad argues that the main aim for the novel is to produce empathy through its narrative, but he questions in what way and for whom it achieves this. Throughout the novel there are several African-American characters committing crime, the main perpetrators being King and his gang the King Lords. Haddad argues that Thomas in her novel “uncritically reproduces narratives of black criminality and lends added credibility to the abuses themselves” (Haddad 2018; 41). By ‘abuses’ Haddad here seems to mean the mistreatment of

African-American people by the police. By including this heavy criminal element in the novel Haddad argues that Thomas is creating sympathy for the police and their actions towards the people of Garden Heights as well as perpetuating the narrative of African-Americans as more prone to criminality.

One of the ways Haddad argues that Thomas is creating empathy for the police rather than the people of Garden Heights is in her use of the scene in which Starr is throwing a tear gas cannister at the police. This scene is well known to be an allusion to the Pulitzer-prize winning picture taken by Robert Cohen of activist Edward Crawford throwing a tear gas cannister back at the police, which became an image of the Ferguson protests which in turn became the starting point of the Black Lives Matter movement. Haddad is not opposed to Thomas using this image in her novel, but rather how she is using the image. In the novel Starr is throwing the cannister in anger and vengeance of what the police have done to her friend and many others and have gotten away with. According to Haddad this is directly opposed to Crawford's own statements about his situation and intent, which was to get the tear gas cannister away from children nearby and that he acted on instinct, but instead Haddad argues Thomas follows the narrative that was put forward by the police at the time and used to excuse the militarised tactics of the Ferguson police against the protestors (Haddad 2018; 45). Levin also chooses to point out the parallel with the real-life moment of kicking the tear gas cannister back towards the police, which Haddad also highlights, but in a far more positive way. (Levin 2020; 162). While Haddad criticises the inclusion of anger and revenge as motives for the action, Levin instead focuses on the encouragement to action the connection to the Ferguson protests brings.

The story of Starr parallels that of several victims, witnesses and activists of racial issues, and the novel had several moments that have direct real-life counter parts. One of the moments Levin highlights is Starr serving as a witness against the police officer who killed her friend being paralleled to Jeantel, the witness in the murder of Trayvon Martin. She was discredited for reasons such as use of language and background, both in the courtroom and by the public (Levin 2020; 149). By using parallels to real-life events or moments Levin argues that Thomas achieves a connection between the story of her character and the situation real people are facing, and in doing so is encouraging her female African-American readers to connect their lived narrative with activism both in and out of the book. Haddad also argues that this and other connections with real-life events, such as the list of real victims of police violence at the end of the novel, allows the narrative to "pivot from the first person towards the collective and collective purpose" (Haddad 2018; 43). The narrative goes from being

about Starr and her experience fighting against the injustice that happened to her friend, to becoming about all of society and the narrative of fighting against these real-life injustices. Although disagreeing on the aspects Thomas used to achieve this, both Haddad and Levin appear to agree on her goal being to relate it to a collective purpose of activism.

Haddad focuses on the novel's connection to the BLM movement more than on how the novel approaches the issues of police violence and racism. The result of this is that when Starr (and by extension Thomas) says she does not know how the change in society will happen, but that she believes it will, Haddad views this as being in bad faith towards the movement. He argues that the BLM movement have a clear set of political goals that they view as a way towards achieving a less racist and racially unjust society and that by saying she does not know how improvement will happen she is undermining their political standpoint and in some ways being disloyal to the movement. On the other hand, Levin uses the novel to explore how YA fiction by African-American writers can facilitate social activism and change. He argues that Thomas encourages young African-American female readers to explore how their own narratives can be used in effort to instigate social activism and change in general rather than with a focus on a specific movement.

### **Intersectionality**

Haddad and Levin have clear differences in their understanding of inclusivity and intersectionality. An important criticism from Haddad is his claim that the novel progressiveness is not intersectional enough. As the BLM movement was started by a group of queer women he argues it would be important to have LGBTQ+ representation within the novel that connects itself to the movement. Haddad is especially critical of not putting more focus on the victims of racial crimes that also fall within this category (Haddad 2018; 50). He argues that by not including LGBTQ+ victims, for instance African-American trans-women in the list of victims Thomas is perpetuating the erasure of their narrative (ibid.). In Haddad's view, Thomas's book seems to not be inclusive enough. Levin has a different view on what is necessary for inclusivity and intersectionality. According to him the focus of racial injustice and victims of racial violence have generally been on straight African-American men, at the same time the story of racially based issues faced by, among others, African-American women have been overlooked. Thomas has chosen to have a young female African-American protagonist in her novel, which in turn shapes the reading of the book. Part of the goal of the Black Lives Matter Movement, was to make sure a wider range of narratives was included in



the anti-racist movement (Levin 2020; 149). Levin also points out Thomas's own comments on the need to include the perspective of young black girls, who are often excluded from the narrative (ibid.). In contrast with Haddad's arguments that the novel is not intersectional enough as it does not include LGBTQ+ representation, Levin argues that African-American women are already a marginalised group and including the narrative in the perspective of a young girl is a form of intersectionality in and of itself.

According to Levin, Thomas uses her novel as a way to give her young African-American female readers "a space in which to reflect on and examine the complexities of their own realities" (Levin 2020; 164). The message of the novel is to encourage this group of readers in particular to join in creating the changes they want in the world. "Thomas does not intend her Black female readers to perceive Starr as the definitive representation of what Black female activism should be. Rather, she is a vessel through which they can reflect on their own 'herstories' and the nature of their activism" (Levin 2020; 164). Levin argues here that although Starr serves the role of protagonist and potential role model, she is not perfect and should not be. She is human, as are the readers Thomas is aiming to inspire to tell their narratives, they are allowed to make mistakes. A black protagonist is allowed to be flawed without being an example of racist generalisation, just as white protagonists are allowed to be flawed (ibid.). Thomas is telling her young black female readers that it is more important to engage in creating change than to be perfect while doing it. Here Levin is again contrasting Haddad who instead criticises the novel for perpetuating stereotypes through flawed characters. Haddad focuses on the effect of adding criminal elements among the African-American character while Levin instead focuses on main character and the role she plays in the production of empathy. Levin uses the novel as a lens through which to view the issue of the loss of the narratives of African-American women and the racial issues they face that are often ignored.

### **Starr in the World**

Haddad draws lines between the novel and James Baldwin's essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" in which Baldwin warns against novels aiming to function as political propaganda. Baldwin argued against the use of protest novels, as he claimed they rejected the concept of the whole human and instead places the character only within one characterisation (Baldwin 1984; 23). Drawing on a variety of literature, Levin instead demonstrates how *The Hate U Give* connects to and contrasts other main stream popular literature in the YA genre.

Like many major books and book series (for example *The Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, *Divergent*) this story centres around a protagonist, a ‘chosen one’ who is responsible for leading the fight against a system or individual of oppression who have brought fear to the community which the protagonist represents (Levin 2020; 151). Starr differs from the other protagonists because she’s a young black girl. Thus, rather than limiting Thomas’s novel to a context of African-American writing, Levin enters it into a context of society as a whole.

The term ‘herstory’ is used by Levin to contrast the lacking narratives of African-American women in particular. In the novel Starr’s narrative is finally told, but still centres around her fight for justice in the murder of her male friend. The story is interpreted through the lens of her narrative. While Kahlil was killed by a police officer Starr also had another close friend killed by gun violence. Natasha was murdered while out playing with Starr as a child and her murder was never solved. It is implied this was because this case was under-policed. Unlike the death of Kahlil that sparks outrage throughout the community and beyond, the murder of Natasha was considered more of a ‘private matter’ and therefore not subject to communal action (Levin 2020; 159). This connects to the cross-cultural misogynistic idea of the female body as belonging to their community.

Levin points out that post-racial spaces are something Starr has to navigate regularly, both in her daily life with her friends at the Williamson private school and in the more extraordinary situation of being interviewed by the police regarding her friend’s death, both predominantly white spaces (Levin 2020; 154-156). Post-racial spaces are spaces where it is claimed that race no longer matter and the people there therefore do not perceive racial issues. These areas of her life being framed as post-racial puts Starr in a difficult position when faced with racial injustice. By pointing out racial mistreatment she is also placed in a position where she becomes the one who is blamed for creating a racially charged situation (ibid.).

### **BLM or General Antiracism**

Haddad views *The Hate U Give* as not in line enough with the BLM movement to be able to qualify as a good BLM-novel. The question then could be if that is the aim of the novel. Is *The Hate U Give* meant to be a BLM-novel or is it meant to be a novel for black liberation, regardless of which movement brings it forward? While Thomas does specifically mention BLM in her novel and wants to be connected to this movement, she also mentions many anti-racist movements throughout American history, with a particular focus on the civil rights era. Older characters in the novel also argue about the merits of different civil rights

leaders. Although Haddad does have many strong points in his article, in relation to the argument of *The Hate U Give* not being a good BLM-novel, one could argue that the goal of the novel is anti-racism and not a particular movement. Levin instead focuses more on how the novel connects with the situation for African-American people in general and for African-American girls and women in general. Rather than focusing on the BLM aspect of the novel, Levin analyses how it portrays contemporary issues and points out that Thomas as an African-American woman herself is likely wanting to highlight the role of people like herself in the anti-racist struggle.

### **Salvage the Bones**

The other novel this thesis focuses on is *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward. It is a book that has not garnered the same kind of attention as *The Hate U Give* in the general public but as a critically acclaimed novel and a National Book Award winner it holds a certain position for those particularly interested. Several peer reviewed articles have been written on its approach to racial issues, social criticism and general political awareness.

Annie Bares focuses on the political awareness of the novel through the lenses of critical race theory, ecocriticism and critical disability theory. She argues the political nature of the novel through narrative ruthlessness and its approach to exposing existing racial issues. Christopher W. Clark focuses mainly on embodiment but also on race within the novel. He points to the consequences of Katrina and the way in which she highlights existing conditions for the people of this novel.

### **Social Criticism**

Bares points out how Ward herself refers to a narrative ruthlessness in her work that she utilises as a strategy in depicting the social injustice and environmental vulnerability faced by her characters, in order to give a realistic portrayal. She “couldn’t dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us” (Bares 2019; 21). The use of narrative ruthlessness is thus inherently political as it serves in her clear social criticism.

As part of its social criticism, Bares argues that the novel has a goal of showing ongoing and invisible forms of violence by depicting the hurricane as exposing and exacerbating existing forms of injustice (Bares 2019; 22). The characters are victims of slow violence, a phenomenon felt daily by the poor globally. In the US the effects of such violence

are closely tied to the history of racial subjugation and injustice. Within *Salvage the Bones* Bares claims the characters are victims of slow violence in relation to societal injustice based mainly on race, environmental disaster as a result of anthropogenic climate change, as well as in regard to societal injustice related to disability. Each of the forms of injustice and vulnerabilities enhances and worsens each other. Clark categorises Hurricane Katrina as one of the major figures of the novel. Much like Bares, Clark also agrees that the consequences of the storm and the racial and class issues of the area exacerbated each other. It became evident that there no longer existed any safety net for those already in a precarious position who suffered most in the wake of the hurricane, the Batiste family falls squarely within this category of people who were already struggling before Katrina, agreeing with Bares on how the factors worsen each other.

Katrina has often been directly linked to the destruction and devastation it caused in New Orleans, but Ward has placed her story in Mississippi. Clark argues that in doing so Ward has provided a new perspective on Katrina and its consequences. Mississippi and the area in which the Batistes live is one of the poorest areas in the US (Clark 2015; 343). In combination with the systemic racism and its legacy that has trapped many African-Americans in poverty this meant that people like the characters of the novel were those hardest hit by the consequences of the storm. They had no chance to muster any resources to escape its destruction. In this changing of perspective on the hurricane to these poorer areas, Bares argues that Esch and her family in the novel are part of what has been called the sacrifice zone. This is a term used to describe how “low-income and minority populations, living adjacent to heavy industry and military bases, are required to make disproportionate health and economic sacrifices that more affluent people can avoid” (Lerner in Bares 2019; 24). These are people who are sacrificed in order for certain other populations to benefit from development and avoid environmental harm because the people who are sacrificed are deemed disposable. Uneven development has exacerbated racialised poverty through placing dangerous and debilitating jobs and environmentally toxic industrial sites in poor communities, particularly in poor communities of colour (Bares 2019; 24). Not only the family of the main character but her whole community falls within this group of people considered disposable, marked by environmental destruction, climate change and consumptive and exploitative capitalism. Bares argues it is all politically planned and part of a system of state racism.

One way *Salvage the Bones* includes histories of racial capitalism and environmental degradation is, according to Bares, through the example of the Pit, the family home of the

main character. Through narrativizing the history of the Pit, Esch is connecting its present to “a genealogy of racialized environmental slow violence” (Bares 2019; 26). Their family home was once a farm capable of sustaining their livestock, but through less than favourable financial deals between Esch’s grandfather and several white people who wanted to buy part of the soil the land was destroyed and now lives up to its name of a being the Pit. The current realities of the lives of the family are shaped through the history of racialized economic conditions. Clark expands the issue beyond the Pit, he claims the landscape itself says much about the conditions of the characters and their lives. The image of the landscape as bleeding and destroyed is a mirror of the social injustice experienced by the residents of Bois Sauvage, including the Batiste family. The location thus becomes “a marker for both the natural and cultural hardships that the residents face” (Clark 2015; 344). The nature of the area in which the characters reside is broken and has been broken down through generations of injury. The injury of the area is often hidden, which Clark argues is similar to the way the injuries of black bodies are only viewed momentarily before they are hidden and forgotten.

### **Atypical Family and Care**

The main character of the novel is fifteen years old and pregnant. Bares points out that Ward and her narrative ruthlessness do not romanticise Esch’s situation or categorises her as an illegitimate mother because of her circumstances. Instead, she claims the pregnancy and the approach Ward takes to it forces the reader to consider the effects of economic and political systems on this young girl getting pregnant and the circumstances she finds herself in when she is. Not only is her poverty and the racial injustice behind it the root to her lack of health care, it is also the root to her lack of information. She is aware that abortion is something that exists but that she can never afford, and she is instead left to consider supposed at-home remedies that she has only learned by listening to the white girls at her school. According to Bares, the pregnancy becomes a debilitating condition that she has no way of doing anything about, she has no real choice and it is all part of what could be called the aftermath of slavery and the skewed life chances (Bares 2019; 30). A lack of healthcare or poor healthcare also played a major part in the labour-related death of Esch’s own mother, showing the hereditary nature of racialised injustice.

The novel goes against certain cultural tropes in regard to pregnancy and motherhood. Bares points out that rather than seeing Esch’s pregnancy as an issue that must be cured as a narrative resolution, the novel shows alternative infrastructures of care that can arise. The

novel could have ended with a marriage plot between Esch and Big Henry, instead the alternative infrastructure of care rejects traditional ideas of family and independence in favour of kinship and interdependence. The Batiste family in the novel becomes what Clark calls an atypical model that subverts conventional ideas of the American family. The family are representatives of a large population in the US, particularly the South, who are working-class, in poverty, often unemployed, and uneducated. Despite these issues, the people of the family have many traits that goes against what society expect of people that fall within these population groups. A strong example is the main character of the novel, Esch. Although coming from a background some may see as making any school achievement very difficult, she is a straight-A English student in high school and often refers to Greek mythology throughout the novel. In her character she challenges the preconceived notions people may have about the Bois Sauvage residents as well as prejudices bound up in both race and class. The combination of Clark's argument of the Batistes as an atypical model of family and Bares's alternative infrastructures of care help each other subvert the existing stereotypes of African-American people.

### **The Hurricane**

Another defiance of the ideal of independent selfhood that Bares categorises as ableist, is the issue of mobility within the novel. The Batiste family has a legacy of not evacuating and does not agree with the "ableist insistence on mobility as an unquestionable desirable outcome" (Bares 2019; 33). When seen in connection with the history of the force coerced unto black bodies by the state the choice to resist the recommendation to leave can be seen as an act of preservation rather than of desperation (ibid.). The Batiste family are an example of African-Americans being seen as throwaway, Clark argues. Their entire existence is surrounded by trash and waste from the building of white capitalism and wealth. However, having been left as waste themselves in the face of the hurricane, the Batiste family joins with the community who in solidarity challenges what could be seen as the expected outcome for black bodies. Symbolised by Esch's conversation with Big Henry at the end of the novel, it shows how black southerners continue to join together and survive as a community in the face of hardships.

According to Clark, the hurricane has two main consequences on the Batiste's society. It uncovers how the racialised systems and their consequences on the people who are already struggling with the least. At the same time, Katrina can represent both the oppression by

white people forced upon the black population in the area, but it also serves as a destabilising force that wipes away the existing forms of white cruelty and oppression. This is somewhat in line with Bares, who claims that even though the ending of the novel is climactic, it refuses any neat resolution. There is no clear idea about how the primary problems will be fixed or what will happen to the main character and her family going forward. Instead “the novel’s narrative ruthlessness refuses to pity its characters or comfort its readers with a neat or redemptive resolution” (Bares 2019;32). With the inherent political nature of her narrative ruthlessness Ward achieves a more realistic take on life in the wake of the hurricane and her political statement on the need for change, the possibility for change underlined by the two consequences of the hurricane highlighted by Clark.

Bares also points out that although there have been claims of fatigue of stories related to Katrina, there has been a lack of stories such as *Salvage the Bones* that includes the added injustices of race and class and the effect on people who are vulnerable to these issues as well as the environmental disaster.

## **5. *The Hate U Give* and the Telling of Systemic Racism**

The *Hate U Give* has a goal of educating its young readers on the current situation for African-Americans in the US, and reads as a call to action toward activism among a new generation. The novel by Angie Thomas follows the life of Starr Carter from the night her childhood friend is shot and killed by a police officer and in the following fight to get justice for his murder. Starr is a sixteen-year-old girl who grew up in the predominantly African-American neighbourhood of Garden Heights, an area which at first glance can be categorised as troubled, marked by poverty, crime, gangs and a troubled relationship with authorities. Meanwhile, Starr attends a predominantly white private school called Williamson Prep in which she is the only African-American girl in her year. This combined living and schooling situation forms the background for the novel and for Starr's life.

### **Life of the People of Garden Heights**

Almost every aspect of the main character at the beginning of the novel is a reflection of the idea of living with several versions of herself based on the context she finds herself in. In Garden Heights she is one version of herself, while in Williamson she is another. Both versions she presents are based on the expectations of the people around her and having to fit a certain role. While in Williamson she has to be careful not to be perceived as falling within unfortunate stereotypes of African-Americans, watching both her words and behaviour essentially at all times, in Garden Heights she attempts to fit in with the people she grew up with without really succeeding. There is a consistent feeling of never being fully in tune with either role, never being enough of either version to fit in perfectly. In her own words, "being two different people is so exhausting" (Thomas 2018; 296). Living as two people based on the context is taking its toll on her. In this sense Starr falls in line with Du Bois' double consciousness, the two identities cohabitating in her while never being able to unite. According to Hughes, her going to a majority white prep school and rarely spending time with her African-American friends any more may very well put her in the group middle class people who strive towards whiteness. It can be argued that Starr and her family and try to prove themselves better than the African-American population and the role they are perceived to have in society, something Hughes heavily criticised.

However, throughout the novel, both Starr and her family's approach to their African-Americanness changes. Although both her parents are very much in favour of fighting the systematic oppression and injustices towards African-American people and wanting to



promote antiracism, they find it difficult in practice. The father, Maverick, taught his children the Black Panthers' Ten-Point Program at a young age and is passionate about the legacy and messages of Civil Rights leaders in US history, he finds it much harder to support the fight and speaking up when it is his own daughter who will be put in the difficult position. As does the mother, Lisa. This shows some of the two-sided coin faced by those wanting to oppose the dominant ideology, it means putting oneself or one's loved ones on the line. It becomes a requirement to choose between fighting for the betterment of conditions for all African-Americans or personal safety and private life.

The book begins on the night Starr's African-American friend Khalil is shot and killed by a white police officer after having been pulled over, which the reader gets to see from the point of view of Starr herself. There is no questioning the gruesomeness and horror of a sixteen-year-old unarmed boy being shot to death based on the prejudice of the police officer, who then points his gun at the unarmed friend. Haddad questions who Thomas tries to gain sympathy for through her book, but as Khalil dies in the street there is no question who Thomas wants her readers to sympathise with in that moment.

The book portrays a tight nit nuclear family while simultaneously focusing on alternate infrastructures of care within the community. The reason Starr and Khalil were so close was partially due to the system of childcare in their area. Khalil's mother is a drug addict who although she loves her children, is incapable of taking care of them. Because of this and no mention of their father, Khalil and his brother were raised by their grandmother. Starr's father was in prison for a time when she was young, leaving her mother to take care of her on her own. This led her mother to drop out of school, when Khalil's grandmother discovered this she took it upon herself to provide additional childcare for Starr and enabling her mother to go to school. This is an example that shows the alternate systems of care the community have created for themselves in the absence of public safety nets. The people in this area have in ways been abandoned by society. A lack of outside help has caused them to create their own systems in order for the community to function.

### **Function of Criminals**

The murder of Khalil shapes the events of the novel. Khalil was a sixteen-year-old boy himself when he was shot and killed. At the time of his death he was unarmed and had no contraband in his car, only a hairbrush the police officer later claimed he thought was a gun. An important part of the narrative in the novel is the story of Khalil from different

perspectives. In the eyes of those who knew him he was a kind and caring boy who took care of his family but had recently fallen into difficulty. That is not the story portrayed by the media or told by the police in the book. From the very first interview with Starr the police attempt to paint him as a criminal and a drug dealer, which is then further conveyed in the media. It is initially one of the only identifying markers of who the victim of the shooting is, “a suspected drug dealer” (Thomas 2018; 106). Khalil did in fact deal drugs, but the police had no evidence for that at this point, nor did it have anything to do with his murder. The contrast of who Khalil was and how he is portrayed by the media shows how the dominant ideology, which is suitable to the majority, shifts the story of Khalil. Existing prejudices makes it easy for them to paint him as a criminal and a villain of society.

Haddad argued that by adding the criminal elements in the stories of several of the characters, Thomas was creating empathy for the police in their actions. One could also argue that in the case of Khalil, Maverick, DeVante and others, she is doing the exact opposite. These are all people who at some point in their lives have dealt drugs and/or committed other crimes, but they are still portrayed in a very favourable light. Rather than blaming them and discrediting their characters through their criminal activity, Thomas looks closer into the reasoning behind their actions. All come from poverty and broken families in a society where opportunities were small or non-existent. Khalil took on the responsibility of selling drugs in order to pay his mother’s debt after she stole from a gang leader. DeVante needed a community and protection as well as an income, as did Maverick in his youth. All these young boys and men, as well as many others, started at an extremely young age, and once you are in there is no safe way out. Maverick himself explains the precarious position to his daughter and DeVante, the only way for him to get out of the gang was by taking the blame and going to prison for three years instead of the gang leader. Thomas and her characters do not blame the individual characters for their criminal actions, but instead the system that drove them to it. There are also worse criminal individuals, such as King, the leader of the King Lords gang, but even in his case it is made clear that he was born into his role with little opportunity to choose otherwise. He is seen as a bad person and villain, but also in his case the system of under-policing, as well as Garden Heights and its people being treated as disposable by the government work in his favour. He is not seen as representative of the people of Garden Heights, but at the same time not as a threat to the police. Instead the empathy built is for the common people of Garden Heights rather than either police or criminal. The majority of the population in the area are portrayed as ordinary good people who simply want to continue with their lives in the best way possible.

## **Good Cop, Bad Cop, Criminal**

King and Uncle Carlos in some ways serve as similar yet opposites in their respective groups. King is the exception among the community of Garden Heights. He is a career criminal, gang leader and domestic abuser, but he is in no way seen as representative of the community he belongs to. He occasionally seemingly tries to fit in, initially has a superficially acceptable relationship with Maverick and his family as a result of mutual respect, but in reality does not. He is feared by most and never actually included as a part of the community because of his criminal ways, his behaviour makes him an outsider and exception to the community he from the outside is supposed to belong to. Uncle Carlos is also an outsider and exception in the community he belongs to, the police department, but in an opposite way to King. Carlos is a good person and a good police officer, he believes in the ideal of protecting and serving society and he is willing to stand up for what he considers to be right. He is however sadly not representative of the police as a whole. The police are a threat to the safety of the main characters, the constant experience with law enforcement for Starr and her family is fear at the sight of them. For the people of Garden Heights, the experience is that the police is out to get them rather than help them, and they can never know which police officers will break the law and get away with it. Uncle Carlos, like Starr, has a double identity in which he is visibly different in the eyes of his family when surrounded by other police officers. In the second to last chapter of the book Carlos has been on leave for a while because of an altercation, even so as the police show up around his family's store that has burned down Starr states; "He's been in cop mode since his colleagues arrived" (Thomas 2018; 422). In the presence of other police officers, he takes on an alternative identity. Both King and Uncle Carlos are outsiders and exceptions to the group they belong to, but in opposite ways and on opposite sides of the issue of systemic racism.

Outside of Uncle Carlos, the police are still felt to be omnipresent in the novel, always in the background and potentially around every corner. It starts with the police officer who shoots and kills Khalil, a specific individual who is feared for a specific reason, he has proven himself capable of murdering a teenage boy without cause. In her role as the witness, Starr then has to go to the police station to be interviewed. Despite this being the place of her beloved uncle's work, Starr cannot feel safe. "A handful of cops talk on phones, type on computers, or stand around. Normal stuff, like on *Law & Order*, but my breath catches. I count: One. Two. Three. Four. I lose count around twelve because the guns in their holsters

are all I can see. All of them, two of us” (Thomas 2018; 95). Someone with the same job, same uniform and same gun as every other police officer has just used that power to kill her friend, and now in order to tell the truth of what happened to that friend Starr has to walk into an office full of them. The police show up repeatedly, and every time a sense of fear or chaos follows. As the protests and riots start in Garden Heights the police presence suddenly increases drastically. At the information that Khalil was unarmed, the neighbourhood responds with anger. This is met with tear gas and road blocks from the police, who choose to guard the Walmart while letting smaller local businesses get looted. The area suddenly goes from being severely under-policed to severely over-policed.

After the initial outbursts of protests and riots in the area, the police stay, and their response is undeniably militarised. The police start driving around the streets in tanks and arresting everyone who breaks the imposed curfew. Tear gas and smoke became common in the area even when things were relatively peaceful, “the news said last night was the first semi-peaceful night in the Garden. Just protests, no riots. Cops were still throwing tear gas though” (Thomas 2018; 254). The militarised police responses in the novel are clearly inspired by the response to Black Lives Matter protests, like the unrest in Ferguson. From a Norwegian point of view, this type of action against the civilian population by the police can be argued to seem almost dystopian in nature. Haddad’s arguments about Thomas, intentionally or not, building empathy for the police by including heavy criminal elements among the African-American population seem almost a moot point amidst all these actions committed against the population, but at the same time shows the importance of cultural context. This thesis is very much a work from an outside perspective on the US and the issues of race within it. Much like the novel portrays, the role of the police is seen very differently and is far more debated inside the US than what these actions by police would cause in other free democracies. Within the US, the riots, looting and criminal individuals may for some be cause for empathy with the police, but it could be argued that also within the US this is dependent on the existing view the individual holds on the police and issues of systemic racism.

### **The Narrative of Race**

The struggle to get justice for Khalil in the novel is very much based on the struggle between two narratives to be established as truth. One narrative, that of Starr, is the story of systemic racism leading to a police force that can commit heinous acts against minority

populations without significant repercussions. On the other hand is the narrative of the historically dominant ideology and majority white population with an unwavering faith in US public institutions, a presumed guilt of the African-American population and presumed innocence of the police, leading to a view of the police as morally superior and trustworthy. From the very beginning Khalil is reported as a suspected drug dealer. Meanwhile the police officer's father is interviewed on TV and paints his son as an innocent person merely doing his job, but ended up fearing for his life, a cross around his neck to show God supports his innocence and truthfulness. His description of the threat the police officer was under made it seem like a kill or be killed scenario. Starr's thoughts sum it up, "he makes us sound like we're superhumans. We're kids" (Thomas 2018; 243). While Starr is listening to the interview, Thomas draws direct lines back to the situations of Frederick Douglass, Harriett Jacobs and all the other enslaved people. The father of the officer claims his son wanted to make a difference in the lives of the people of Garden Heights, "funny. Slave masters thought they were making a difference in black people's lives too (...). Same shit, different century" are Starr's responding thoughts (Thomas 2018; 242). Much like in the past, the majority narrative is of African-Americans as not quite equal or as human as the white man, a man with nothing but good intentions. The novel as a whole is told through the perspective of Starr, presenting her view of Khalil's murder as exactly that, using her experiences to show the systemic issues she is faced with in trying to get justice for her friend.

Starr comes from a very unprivileged background, but in virtue of being herself has gained some privileges that cannot be taken from her, and that aid in her fight for justice for Khalil. Levin compares Starr's conversations in interviews by police and the media with that of Jeantel, an African-American girl who was a witness in the murder of Treyvon Martin and who was discredited based on language and background. Unlike Jeantel, Starr cannot be discredited in this way. She is articulate and very aware of her own use of language in meeting with white authority figures, she is a good student at a respected private school and has no history of getting in trouble of any kind. There is no aspect of her character that would discredit her. From the moment Khalil is shot, Starr does everything she is supposed to do, she follows the system as it is set up in an attempt to seek justice. The first step is her initial interview with the police in which she calmly and clearly states the fact of the incident and remains respectful towards the police officers despite her inner turmoil and fear. She is very aware of how she presents herself, her choice of words, and leaving little to no room for misinterpretations. The words of her father are in the back of her head, "*don't let them put words in your mouth*" (Thomas 2018; 101). These words help her be specific in her statement

and make sure there is no room for the officers to use her words to shift blame from the police officer over to Khalil. It becomes evident that the police officers are attempting to both discredit Starr and justify the officer's actions. In response Starr tells them, "'One-Fifteen killed him,' I say. 'How much of a bigger picture do you need?'" (Thomas 2018; 105). Already at this point Starr is aware that despite her doing everything she is supposed to be doing, the system and the people in it are working against her, as is the existing dominant narrative of African-Americans as more prone to criminality and less trustworthy than white people.

The next official step in the case for Starr is a meeting with the District Attorney (DA). At this first meeting Starr describes the DA as "a middle-aged white lady who claims she understands what I'm going through" (Thomas 2018; 262). This holds an echo of Hurston's words of white people only being able to hear what the African-American person has experienced but are incapable of feeling it in the same way. The DA is trying to be understanding and kind, but it is clear to Starr that the DA cannot understand her experience no matter how much she explains it. Also in this interaction with authority Starr does everything she is supposed to, she follows the path of the system. She tells the same story she told the police, but she is far less calm. Having to once again relive the experience of watching her friend get shot instead ends up with Starr crying and puking. A highly emotional response, but once again nothing about her statement or character is anything that could discredit her.

Starr's final official step within the system in her fight for Khalil is the hearing with the grand jury. This is the determining step she can take towards an indictment of the officer. Although she has gained massive support in her community both among her neighbours as well as even having gang fractions on her side, most people of Garden Heights are in support of her and there are protesters in her favour outside, Starr is suddenly very alone as she enters into the grand jury room. Not even her own lawyer is allowed in. Instead it is a sixteen-year-old girl alone with the DA and the grand jury, all trying to judge her credibility. When told that she is in no way on trial that day, Starr answers that she understands, but her internal monologue reveals her actual experience is very different, "bullshit. Khalil and I have been on trial since he died" (Thomas 2018; 329). She has become the representative of both her and Khalil, and everything she does may affect the chances of getting justice for him. Once again Starr has to tell the story of what happened, but this time she feels almost robotic after having told the story so many times.

In every meeting with authorities Starr has done exactly what she was supposed to do, she has followed every step the system has set up to seek justice against abuse of power, but it still proves to be not enough. The grand jury decides to not indict the police officer, the system has decided that there is to be no punishment for the murder of Khalil. Perhaps worse, the system has decided no crime was committed when his life was taken.

The hearing marks the end of Starr's official role within the system in the case to get justice for Khalil, but as the system has failed her, it ends up becoming only part of her strife for justice and fight against racism. This shows the systemic issue of racism. Not only is she faced with people attempting to discredit her based on her race as with many other victims and witnesses, such as Jeantel, but also a system designed to protect the police officer over the rights of the person who was killed.

### **Starr as an African-American Female**

Starr is the main character of the novel, and although all of the mentioned aspects are vital and say very much about the role of African-Americans in US society today and the author's approach to race, it is Starr's personal journey that is the most important aspect of the novel. Starr starts the novel as an ordinary African-American girl, not quite poor and not yet quite middle class. As Levin points out in his article, African-American girls and women are underrepresented in the literature and the general antiracist movement and have been from the beginning. This underrepresentation is part of what makes Harriet Jacobs's narrative special. Starr as a main character then already holds a special position as a female African-American main character in a novel with antiracist political goals. There is a feminist tendency in making this young girl's voice so important, making *The Hate U Give* an already intersectional book in combination with its antiracism, going against Haddad's criticism of it lacking intersectionality.

It is not only Khalil's death that plagues Starr, his death has also brought up memories of the death of their mutual friend Natasha. At the age of ten, while playing with Starr out in the water from a fire hydrant, Natasha was killed in a drive-by shooting. Her murder was never solved. Levin argues that this was because of under policing and this young girl's body being seen as belonging to the community. It is clear that her murder was not prioritised. When she is mentioned it is as a trauma for Starr and as a tragic backstory, but the idea of solving the murder is not a priority for anyone. She is merely forgotten by society. This may

be Thomas's way of underlining the history of African-American girls and women being forgotten both in literature and in the civil rights and antiracist struggles. The differences in the reactions to the two deaths are stark, both gender and the role of the murderer likely play crucial parts in it. Starr feels traumatised and mournful of both deaths, emphasising that their lives mattered. It is Khalil's death that has now burdened her with the responsibility of helping him get justice.

### **Learning About Racism**

From the beginning, Starr is somewhat aware of racial issues and have to deal with some of them herself. She is one of few African-American students in a predominantly white school, where she has to deal with racially based treatment in a supposed post-racial environment. It is clear she is also theoretically conscious of even worse systemic issues many African-Americans face. At a young age her parents had 'The Talk' with her about how to act in case she ever came in contact with the police, a survival guide of sorts, that is unfortunately a necessity for many African-American parents to have with their children. Her father, Maverick, has also educated his children on the history of the Civil Rights movement. The leaders who fought for the betterment of conditions for African-Americans are present as background figures pictured on the walls, or as part of conversations. Maverick wants the next generation to be aware of the work that has already been made by people fighting for the rights of African-American people. It has been a form of additional history education for his children. These figures are presented as saviours, often with a similar presence in day-to-day life as Black Jesus.

"My brothers and I learned to recite the Black Panthers' Ten-Point Program the same way other kids learn the Pledge of Allegiance" (Thomas 2018; 316). This insinuates that Maverick started his additional education for his children at a very young age. Once again, the matter of perspective plays an important part in how to view the content of the novel. From a US perspective it shows how fundamental and valuable Maverick considers this program to be for his children by teaching it to them so young. With a Norwegian perspective it can be argued the focus shifts from the value of the program to the concept of the Pledge of Allegiance. The Black Panther program is about wanting to achieve basic rights and needs for African-Americans that had been denied them by the white majority and dominant ideology. The Pledge of Allegiance is exactly what its name insinuates, it is a way of teaching young children about the importance of loyalty to their nation from a very young age. This type of



pledge, along with the presence of the flag in classrooms, is not common in other democracies. From an outside perspective, the pledge can be argued to have hallmarks of indoctrination. Some would probably argue the same for teaching children the Black Panther program, but the message creates a difference. The program is about the rights of people rather than the government or any political group, making it fit less within the concept of indoctrination than the pledge.

### **Responsibilities of a Witness**

The murder of Khalil thrusts the realities of the worst type of systematic racism unto Starr's everyday life, forcing her to react to it, and later act against it. Starr is left the only witness to the murder which forces her into fulfilling her role in the official case within the system, but also gives her unwanted responsibility outside of the formal official criminal system. At first, she hides her identity, wanting no one to know that she was the person with Khalil that night. When meeting Khalil's grandmother however, she already knows, and Starr is okay with this as she feels the woman who raised him deserved to know. Outside of the immediate families she keeps her presence at the murder hidden for as long as she can, even though the people around her speak of Khalil and his death. At Williamson she denies even knowing him, which feels like a betrayal. Along with the presence of Black Jesus, Thomas uses biblical allusions on several occasions, Starr here denies Khalil as St. Peter denied Jesus.

At Khalil's funeral Starr first encounters Ms. Ofrah from the organization "Just Us for Justice", a charitable group that works to fight against racial injustices. The group have taken an interest in Khalil's case and announces to those present that he was unarmed at the time of his murder, which leads to the first wave of outrage, protest and riots in the community. Ms. Ofrah and her organization are aware that Starr is the witness and want to give her legal aid and help protect her rights and voice. As the first wave of outrage is still ongoing, the police through the news release Khalil's picture as well as announce that they "see no reason to arrest the officer" and claim that "there are multiple reports that a gun was found in the car" (Thomas 2018; 140). Watching these news reports Starr blame herself, believing she must have not said what she should have if they are not arresting the officer, while simultaneously knowing that Khalil was unarmed. For every time things go against justice for Khalil Starr feels responsible and guilty for not being more helpful to her friend and for letting the people around her down. Any fight for justice for Khalil is done by volunteers, which underlines the systemic nature of the issues.

## Reasons to Speak Up

A series of events in relative quick succession caused Starr to make the decision to speak up about what happened with Khalil. There are three main events, apart from the murder itself, that leads to her decision; a conversation with her father, a protest by her peers in her school, and an action by the police.

In the car just before his murder, Starr and Khalil talked about the meaning of Tupac's *Thug Life*, this is a conversation she follows up with her father in chapter ten of the novel. Maverick admires Tupac, claiming he cared about "uplifting black people" (Thomas 2018; 1669). Tupac is here in line with Hughes's view of race, the need to embrace where one came from and the responsibility each individual hold to uplift all African-Americans. This is true for Tupac the rapper, but in his admiration Maverick shows these are beliefs he holds himself. The main quote by Tupac the two characters discuss is the one that has inspired the name of the book itself. *Thug Life*, meaning "The Hate U Give Little Infants F[uck]s Everybody" (ibid.). This quote by Tupac has been in the back of Starr's head since the murder, and now in her conversation with her father she is ready to talk about what she has learned it means. In her interpretation, the 'infants' Tupac is talking about are all those oppressed by society, and the hate given is racism.

Maverick here takes on his role as someone older and more experienced with the system of oppression they are discussing, wanting Starr to see the bigger picture of the situation faced by many, going deeper than the label of racism. Starting with Khalil and his situation, Maverick shows why he and other may have made that choice. He argues there are no opportunities

Corporate America don't bring jobs to our communities, and they damn sure ain't quick to hire us. (...) It's easier to find some crack than it is to find a good school around here. Now think 'bout this (...) How did the drugs even get in our neighbourhood? This is a multibillion-dollar industry we talking 'bout, baby. That shit is flown into our communities, but I don't know anybody with a private jet. Do you?" (Thomas 2018; 168).

Maverick points out that a lack of opportunities forces people to make choices that bring them into criminality. Money is needed to survive, but if people cannot get an education or a job, crime becomes one of the only real ways to get them. It is outside influences that has caused these circumstances, both the lack of opportunities and the concept of drugs as a viable option. The consequences are then that these people get arrested and sent to prison, which Maverick points out is another billion-dollar industry in the US. "That's the hate they're giving us, baby, a system designed against us. That's *Thug Life*" (Thomas 2018; 169).

Through their conversation Maverick is educating his daughter in the fact that racism is not only individual incidents with individual people, but a systemic problem that makes life difficult for many people. In this system African-Americans are seen as disposable and a way for others to achieve financial gain. The system is rigged to the extent that it has become easier to fall into a life of drugs and crime than it is to stay out of it. Those at the bottom of the societal ladder continue to struggle as the system continues providing financial gain to those already in charge.

This conversation with her father becomes both an educational conversation and makes Starr even more conscious of the need to speak up about her experiences. She understands that people are angry because of what happened to Khalil and the circumstances that caused the situation were not unique but happens repeatedly due to the systemic issues of racism. Although Maverick is divided on whether she should speak up, he too concludes that she cannot be silent. Starr has to choose for herself, but Maverick's division shows how the systemic issues weaponise the interhuman care of oppressed people in order to keep them from going against the dominant ideology and system. Having been introduced to the bigger picture of systemic racism Starr realises that her speaking up or staying silent is about more than her and Khalil; "This is about Us, with a capital U; everybody who looks like us, feels like us, and is experiencing this pain with us despite not knowing me or Khalil. My silence isn't helping Us" (Thomas 2018; 170). In this conversation and her following reaction, Starr becomes a stand-in for the reader. As Maverick is teaching her, he is also teaching the reader about this perspective, and the conclusions Starr comes to are conclusions she reaches with the reader along for the ride. It becomes an educational conversation both for Starr and the reader, which with the target audience for a young adult novel is likely to be around the same age as Starr.

The next major event that influences Starr in her decision is a protest held at her school. The protest is a walk out, the students leave their classrooms in protest of Khalil's murder. It is initiated by Starr's friend Hailey's older brother, and in his messages, he makes it clear that the main point for him is to get out of class rather than make a statement about justice for Khalil. Hailey even shows disgust at protesting the death of a drug dealer. Most of the students in school join in this protest, but Starr knows how it started and therefore chooses not to participate. The protest becomes an example of performative activism, the students look as if they are politically aware and want to protest injustice, but in reality, it is done for personal gain. There are still nuances to this protest, not everyone is aware of why it was initiated. Starr thinks to herself that "some of them may not care that he was a drug dealer.

They might be almost as upset as I am. But since I know *why* Remy started this protest, I stay in my seat” (Thomas 2018; 182-183). She does not blame her peers for joining in the protest, for many it may very well be that it is a political statement against racial injustice, but the origin of the protest destroys any meaning it may have held. Thomas here emphasises the value of intention. Acts of protest done for the wrong reason may instead end up invalidating those with pure intentions. If one protest is done to get out of class, that connotation will be connected to the next protest, whether true or not.

Starr and her family end up once again facing questionable treatment from the police in the third of these defining incidents, the very same day as the protest at school. Maverick has to provide the police with his ID, and once his identity is known the police have a negative reaction. At seeing his name, they realise Starr is the witness against their colleague. Immediately they order Maverick down on the ground with his hands behind his back, with no evidence of any crime taking place. This happens as people on the street and in neighbouring businesses have come out or stopped to watch. The act appears vindictive, underlining how those in power can continue to abuse it in order to stay in power. As opposed to with Natasha’s murder, Garden Heights has suddenly become an area of over-policing. This coincides clearly with media attention on the area and criticism of the police following Khalil’s murder.

The police eventually let Maverick go with the parting words; “I’m keeping an eye on you, boy. Remember that” (Thomas 2018; 192). Although these words are said by the African-American police officer of the two, calling an African-American man “boy” carries heavy connotations. This infantilisation of African-American men carries back to the days of slavery, carrying another connection between the language of police officers and slave masters. The fact that this police officer is African-American himself can be argued to demonstrate the indoctrination of systemic racism. Through his work in the police this man now holds internalised racism, and his loyalty to the police is stronger than any African-American identity he may hold. He has become one of the people Hughes claimed strive for whiteness, believing it to be more virtuous and has left his African-Americanness behind.

The relatively major events in Starr’s life in such a short period of time, connected with other events throughout the book, has inspired her to speak up for Khalil. As the witness she feels a responsibility to her friend and a need to stand up for him. The ways in which Starr decides to speak up gradually escalates, with three distinct levels of exposure of herself. Her very first steps into speaking out is completely anonymous, by making a Tumblr page dedicated to showing who Khalil was to those who knew him. In this way she is humanising

him to the public, showing the young boy he was rather than the criminal drug dealer the police and certain media coverage has painted him out to be.

### **Anonymous Interview**

The next step in Starr's gradual journey into speaking up for Khalil is a TV interview in which she tells her story but is completely anonymised. In this interview Starr sees it as her responsibility to show who Khalil really was and what really happened when he was murdered. "Ms. O'fray once said that this is how I fight, with my voice" (Thomas 2018; 282). By doing this interview Starr is deciding for herself to start to fight against the injustice she has seen and experienced, speaking up becomes an act of fighting in itself.

In her interview Starr uses her voice to fight two different types of injustices against Khalil and the whole of her community, beginning with King's rule by fear in Garden Heights. The idea of snitching is important throughout the novel in regard to how people relate to the crime going on in the neighbourhood. Simply by living in Garden Heights one is bound to have some information about the crimes of King and gang members in general. One of the ways they keep evading being caught for their crimes is through fear, any snitching will be punished by violence or in some cases even death. Starr and her family have always followed this rule, but during this interview she partially breaks it. She tells the truth of how Khalil only sold drugs because his mother's life was in danger from a gang leader as well as how he was never a member of any gang, "it's dry snitching, but it's snitching" (Thomas 2018; 283). In saying these things, she knows she is making herself a target to King. The novel does not hide that speaking up can potentially come at a cost.

The main injustice Starr is standing up to, the main injustice throughout the novel, is the murder of Khalil by the police. Although she has repeatedly told her story within the system, this is the first time Starr tells her story to the media and the general population. The version of the police officer has been told repeatedly by re-runs of his father's interview defending his actions and supported by the information the police has released, and the media has thus far not been on Khalil's side. The goal of Starr's interview is to change this. After having to answer questions about Khalil's possible gang affiliation, Starr answers that he is not affiliated but that she struggles to see the relevance of this to his murder. "I didn't know a dead person could be charged with his own murder, you know?" (Thomas 2018; 284). She describes her own statement as a "jab to the mouth" (ibid.), her words are strong and hard enough to show how misplaced the blame has been thus far in the discourse about Khalil's

death. Any criminal act in the past cannot justify him being shot to death when doing nothing wrong. This underlines the continued injustice of a biased public narrative, and how the only way to fight ideas is through presenting the narrative of one's experience.

For the first time, apart from to Uncle Carlos, Starr tells the story of how the police officer pointed his gun at her. This was not information known by anyone else. Here, Thomas is once again using Starr's role as an articulate and well-behaved young girl from a respected private school to make a point. The argument of Khalil's real and potential crimes has been continuous in the case, but no one can use any of the arguments applied to justifying his murder to Starr. She is in no way a threat and so the police officer pointing his gun at her shows an innate bias that is not related to who the person is, only the person's skin colour. Hughes criticised African-Americans living lives too close to the ideal of the white American, but here Thomas is using Starr's proximity to white ideals as a weapon against racial prejudice.

In addition to talking about the specific police officer who killed Khalil, Starr also brings up systemic issues with the police in general. Uncle Carlos as a representative of good police officers helps the novel have a somewhat more nuanced look at police. Starr herself uses him as an example in her interview;

'My uncle's a cop. I know not all cops are bad. And they risk their lives, you know? I'm always scared for my uncle. But I'm tired of them assuming. Especially when it comes to black people. (...) This all happened because *he*' – I can't say his name – 'assumed that we were up to no good. Because we're black and because of where we live. We were just two kids, minding our business, you know? His assumption killed Khalil. It could've killed me' (Thomas 2018; 285).

Black Lives Matter is specifically mentioned in this novel and it is in some ways directly connected to the movement, this quote also functions as a rebuttal to the Blue Lives Matter movement. It is not that Starr is opposed to the police on principle, and she acknowledges that there are good police officers, but it is the assumptions they hold, the pattern of those assumptions and the deadly consequences of them that cause problems, as well as their militarised response in connection to African-American protests.

The interview gets an overwhelmingly positive response in the novel, but Starr is still anonymous and protected in her way of speaking up. Although her boyfriend recognises her in the interview, the rest of her friends at Williamson are still unaware that Starr is the witness. She is able to continue a semi-normal life while at school, but life there is also

gradually changing as Starr becomes more and more aware of racial issues and tensions in a supposed post-racial school environment.

### **Fighting Words**

The climax of the novel is as Starr's journey into speaking up comes to a head, and it happens in the fifth and final part of the book, after the decision to not indict the police officer has been known. After first learning of the decision, Starr is angry. She has done everything right, she has used her voice as her weapon, but it has not worked. She is now seeking to achieve change any way she can, even if that turns into riots, which is a sentiment echoed throughout Garden Heights. When the peaceful means of trying to achieve change do not work, people reach for what is left in their toolbox. The reader has followed Starr along the way and is therefore able to understand her frustration. As opposed to Haddad's argument, here Thomas is actually building empathy for those rioting by giving the reader a better understanding of why they are doing it, although she also later shows it is not the right way to achieve change.

On every business owned by an African-American person, the windows are boarded up and the words "black owned" spray painted across. This biblical imagery draws connections between the African-American experience of oppression and the Jewish experience of oppression, as well as having been chosen by God. With a history of African-Americans being seen as less than human and refused basic rights such as freedom, painting them to be people chosen by God holds extra weight. Although religious freedom is a constitutional right in the US, the Christian faith and God hold a special place in society, particularly within the Republican Party. Thomas is using ideals and beliefs held by political opponents in favour of the antiracist cause. Using the image of spray paint as lamb's blood to save the business from the angel of death is as close as one may get to saying that God is on their side, emphasised by the presence of Black Jesus in the background throughout the novel and opposing the use of the crucifix by the police officer's father.

In the course of the night, Starr sees people taking part in the protests in different ways. When faced with people rioting and looting, she realises that despite her anger, this is not the right way to go about things. Violence only causes more violence. Using violent tactics only create excuses for the police to have a militarised response. Haddad argued that like by including criminal elements in the novel, including these forms of violent protest in combination with peaceful protests contribute to building empathy for the police. It could also

be argued that Haddad's focus is misplaced. Rather than seeing the effect the violence has on the interaction with the police, the focus should be on how it affects Starr. Although she was initially angry and wanted to riot, seeing it actually done makes her realise this is not the way to achieve change. Instead it destroys the neighbourhood and does cause empathy for the police in the public. These experiences bring Starr back to the idea of using her voice as her weapon.

Along with her small group, Starr finds her way to where Khalil was shot, and a peaceful protest led by Ms. O'frah. The protests are contagious, they inspire Starr to speak up. She uses her voice and tells her story, it is her weapon in fighting the system. Ms. O'frah guides Starr in her actions, telling her that she would be a good activist. The peaceful protest is then turned into something else when the police start to use force against them. This includes the scene where Starr picks up a tear gas canister and chucks it back at police, alluding to the Pulitzer winning photograph from Ferguson and the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement. Haddad and Levin hold very different views on the use of this imagery in the novel. Haddad argues that in using the imagery in connection with Starr's anger Thomas is discrediting and disrespecting the protestor in the original photo, adding malice to his motive and siding with the police's version of events. Levin sees it as a way of connecting the novel to real life events and the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole and does not protest its connotations. This thesis would argue that the scene must be seen in connection with Starr's later statement of "that decision wasn't right" (Thomas 2018; 420). The scene is a way of connecting the story of *The Hate U Give* with real world events and the currently largest antiracist movement, but it is also a way of further condemning violence. Rather than statements or stories of the imagery, the basis for its use in the novel appears to be the image itself and the connection with malice as a way of emphasising the theme of peaceful speech as the way towards change.

## **Educating Readers**

Starr in some ways functions as a stand-in for the reader, and the main purpose of the story is to show both current injustices towards African-Americans, and a guide toward change. It is a young adult novel with a target audience similar to the main character in age. It can be read as a call to action. Like Maverick has taught Starr about the history of civil rights and antiracist movements, Ms. O'frah functions as a tutor in Starr finding her voice and becoming an activist in her own right. The novel is teaching its young readers how they can



contribute in the antiracist movement and does so by appealing to a group that is often neglected, the young African-American girls. By including ally characters of different ages, genders and races along with Starr, she also highlights the importance of working together towards change. Along the lines of Douglass, Jacobs and Hurston, Thomas appears in her writing to see value in having allies when challenging the dominant ideology and culture. The fact that Thomas herself is an African-American woman helps in her authenticity as a guide toward contributing change.

On the very last pages of the novel, Khalil's name is mentioned alongside a list of real-life victims of racially based violence. This is further connecting the events of the novel with real-life events and shifting the focus from Starr's antiracist struggle to the necessity for real-life antiracist activism. Throughout the novel it is Starr who is called to action, and in return the novel acts as a guidebook for how and why its readers should carry on its activism cause.

## **6. *Salvage the Bones* and the Showing of Systemic Racism**

*Salvage the Bones* shows the consequences of systemic racism through generations and the interconnectedness between racism and other social issues. Ward exposes these issues to her reader in the hope of inspiring change. The novel by Jesmyn Ward was targeted towards a more mature audience, which strongly affects the writing style. Unlike *The Hate U Give* which is rather straight forwards in its writing style, *Salvage the Bones* is a more multi-layered book that carries a more complex story and view of the world. As the focus of this thesis is race it will focus on the aspects of the novel that can be related to race. The main character is Esch Batiste, and the story centres around her and her family over a twelve-day period leading up to, and the immediate aftermath of, Hurricane Katrina. Events take place in the fictional rural town of Bois Sauvage by the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The name of the town itself translates to Wild Wood and is a play on the word ‘savage’, insinuating something about the possible outside perception of the characters. The area it is in is also the poorest area in the US, which is reflected in the Batiste family and their community.

### **Disposable People in a Disposable Environment**

Bois Sauvage is very much an African-American town and although the children go to school with children from neighbouring white areas, in their day-to-day life outside of school the people live mostly segregated lives. Every character Esch knows and mentions by name in the novel is African-American or possibly some other minority group, none are described as white. It is only when leaving their immediate area that they encounter white people, for instance at school, the store or along the road. The only white people in proximity are living on a farm in a clearing in the woods at a distance from any African-Americans and the people are unknown to them. In practice, the people of the area live racially segregated lives even though the year is 2005. This segregation is a remnant of generations past. Most of the people appear to be living in the same place their family has for a long time, continuing the generational segregationally divided society which in turn relates to the generational financial situations.

The Batiste family live on a place called the Pit. This was once a farm on which their maternal grandparents lived and had livestock that could survive on the land. The property was, however, completely transformed due to the grandfather’s financial decisions. The

transformation of the land and the origin of its new name is explained in a summary of cause and effect

My mama's mother, Mother Lizbeth, and her daddy, Papa Joseph, originally owned all this land: around fifteen acres in all. It was Papa Joseph nicknamed it all the Pit, Papa Joseph who let the white men he work for dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling earth for money (Ward 2017; 14).

The home and lives of the current Batiste family are shaped by the selling of the earth on the land, leaving behind clay, dirty water, the pit and the woods that are all over the property. The grandfather made the choice to sell the earth, but it is necessary to question how much of a choice he really had. Like the current family his generation was also marked by poverty, the only thing of value he owned was the land. Those who bought the earth from him were his bosses, and in charge of his source of income. Papa Joseph appears to have been taken advantage of by those with more power than him who wanted what he had of value. These white people took advantage of a system that was set up in their favour in order to use what belonged to the poorest in society as building blocks for their own homes and lives. It is a criticism of the current capitalist system and the effects it has had on the poorest in society. Not only has turning the farm into the Pit taken away the opportunities the family originally had, it has made it close to impossible to recreate any opportunities or for the current generation to make their way out of their current situation. Anything of real value is already gone, to the advantage of white people who always had the financial advantage.

Poverty and their environment are the main influences over the lives of the Batiste family. It is not just the Pit that is affected by environmental damage due to capitalism. There is a theme throughout the book of salvaging, using what is laying around in their immediate environment. Things abandoned, broken or useless, thrown away as trash is considered a source of resources for the local population. Bois Sauvage had become a place for what is not wanted by society in general. Although Esch's father is on disability and thus not working, it is safe to assume the types of jobs available in the area to this population with little to no chance of education are jobs that are not particularly safe. This is exemplified by how Esch's father, Claude Batiste, became disabled through a work-related accident. Lerner's sacrifice zones appear to apply to Bois Sauvage. The people are considered disposable and not

important to society, so the environment in which they live is treated accordingly. Seeing as the people are considered disposable, there is no problem with their environment being filled with things disposed of by society, trash, or things the rest of society want to remain safe from, such as toxic substances. Claude Batiste and his disability and subsequent exclusion from society in any real way, given disability cheques and then forgotten about, are an example of how these sacrifice zones affect communities, families and individuals.

It is not only the Batiste family that fall within the sacrifice zone and are considered disposable, it is the entire African-American community of Bois Sauvage. In combination with the practical segregation it is difficult to deny that there appears to be a racially based view on who's lives matter more. Those considered disposable are clearly part of a minority with little opportunity. The sacrifice zone not only is a way of taking advantage of the people within this community, it is also a way of making sure this population stays within the zone. Lerner's sacrifice zones operate on the basis that the damage done is in order to create financial gain for certain white people who already have the financial means to take advantage of these zones, for instance by owning companies that make use of the land and labour. By affecting the environment within which the children grow up, and the jobs available within the area, the zone creates its own reproduction of labour, at least to a certain extent. The sacrifice zones aid in financial gain for those outside it, but also includes either directly or indirectly sacrificing the lives of those deemed disposable. Bois Sauvage, an area with only African-American people, with little to no financial or political power, fits perfectly within the requirements for a sacrifice zone and its population are those paying the price. The abuse from type of slow violence lasts for generations.

### **Role of an African-American Woman and Motherhood**

*Salvage the Bones* focuses heavily on racial issues, but it also focuses on the role of African-American women both within the family and within society.

The mother of the current Batiste family, Rose, died seven years before the events of the book, but is still present through the mind of Esch as the narrator. The memories of her mother create a strong contrast with the current life situation of the family. Unlike their father who is alcoholised and violent, their mother is portrayed as a kind and loving parent. Most good memories Esch has is connected with her mother. Rose was one of eight siblings but the only one of Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's children on the Pit to live. Having seven siblings die at such a young age says much about the conditions of life for the family.

Whether because of poverty or environmental damage, the circumstances around the forming of the Pit were detrimental for the people whose home it was. And yet, Rose continued to live on the land with her own family, scavenging her childhood home to be able to provide for her own children.

Rose was the *primus motor* of the family. While she was alive they were already living in poverty, but their lives were better than in the present of the novel. She was a steady and calming presence in the lives of all her family members. For Esch, her mother was the member of the family she was most similar to and could relate most to; “*Whatever the color the mama is, that’s the color the egg is. (...) Like me and you*” (Ward 2017; 199). The father might be running around as he pleases, but the child is like the mother. This is especially true for Esch as the only girl left in her family after her mother’s death. Without her role model, she now has to figure out the role of woman and mother on her own.

The US is traditionally a patriarchal society, stemming back to the founding fathers, but the same is not true for the Batiste family. The very name of Batiste shows the matriarchal aspects of the family. The family name is the mother’s family name, it is her family’s land they live on. While she was alive the home was shaped entirely by her presence, she was the foundation on which the family is built. As Katrina is starting to hit their area, Esch remembers back to the first hurricane she can remember, sitting by her mother’s side, her mother pulling her and her brother in, keeping them safe. When the mother is dead, so is much of the foundation of the family. The house they live in is standing on cinder blocks with no real foundation and the youngest of the children, Junior, who never met his mother always hides underneath the house when running from something, like a child hiding behind his mother’s legs. The mother is “present in the absence” (Ward 2017; 247), as the reader sees how the family is forced to cope without her.

It is motherhood that defines Rose within the novel, and eventually it is motherhood that kills her. The story is told from Esch’s point of view, we therefore only get her experience of her mother which is exclusively in the role of a mother. But unlike her brothers Esch also shares the role of woman and the potential for motherhood with Rose, which shaped the very last of their interactions in Esch’s memory. Their mother died while giving birth to Junior, starting labour in her own bed, until she was bleeding out and finally driven the hospital, never to return. Her older children’s final memories of her are as she is being taken out to the car on the way to the hospital. While her brother remembers their mother told them she loved them, Esch cannot remember this and is convinced he made it up in his head. Instead Esch remembers the look of her mother and her shaking her head at her daughter,

which Esch think could have perhaps meant: “*Don’t do it. Don’t become the woman in this bed, Esch*” (Ward 2017; 222). Despite all the good Esch has seen in her mother’s motherhood, she now considers that maybe in this moment motherhood was instead an additional struggle on top of every other struggle she had been forced to face, and that the risk to her own daughter may be too great for it to be worth it.

There is one other mother in Esch’s family that shows what being a mother might mean, the Pitbull China. Motherhood was not entered by choice by China, instead she is a very unwilling mother with no fondness for her offspring. What is relevant of China’s motherhood in this thesis is what can be related to motherhood’s intersectionality with race, which in this case is the reaction of those around her to motherhood. China is a fighting dog, she has been trained to participate in dog fights and as such contributes financially to the family. She has been the fiercest fighting dog in the area, but the other people within the dog fighting ring view her differently after she has become a mother. Her owner, Skeetah, enters her to a fight a week after she has given birth, to protests of almost everyone else. The argument is that because China is now a mother she cannot fight as she needs to be available to feed her puppies. Motherhood has taken over her entire identity, she has lost the status she previously held among the dogs. Skeetah still enters her in the fight, a fight that comes at a cost. China’s breast is bitten and a nipple lost during the fight, a pain to herself and a cost in regard to feeding her children. But in the end, China wins her fight as her owner stands on the sidelines and says: “*make them know make them know make them know they can’t live without you*” (Ward 2017; 175). This is directly about the puppies not being able to live without their mother, but also that the society of dogs in which China is a part cannot survive in its form without her as a matriarch keeping them all in line. Once again Ward is emphasising the role of the mother and women as foundational building blocks in the community of Bois Sauvage, despite the lack of female presence in the lives of the characters. Motherhood is presented as the most female experience anyone, particularly China, can have.

In many settings of her life in Bois Sauvage Esch is the only girl, meaning she is forced to face issues the boys and men around her do not. At the age of fifteen she is in the process of managing the transition from girl to woman, but she is doing so with a lack of role models. Instead she is surrounded by boys and men, either family or friends of family. Like Harriet Jacobs, Esch is put in a precarious position in regard to men’s lust, but unlike Jacobs Esch is exposed to the lust of African-American and possibly other minority men rather than white men. Esch is twelve the first time she has sex, and it is not because she particularly wants to, “it was easier to let him keep on touching me than ask him to stop, easier to let him

inside than to push him away, easier than hearing him ask me, *why not?* It was easier to keep quiet and take it than to give him an answer” (Ward 2017; 23). Esch has not learned that it is okay for her to say no or to take ownership over her own body, instead she is routinely taken advantage of by her brothers’ friends and has been for a three-year period. The sexualisation of Esch from a young age by the boys around her is connected with her perceived value as a woman to these boys, a value which in turn is related to the colour of her skin.

## **Colourism**

Colourism appears to be a rampant issue within Bois Sauvage. The Batiste family are all described as being dark-skinned, as is Esch. In fact, the Batiste family are those described as having the darkest skin in Bois Sauvage. Esch is described as dark-skinned and skinny with little to no curves. On the other end of the spectrum of the characters is Manny and Shaliyah, who are both described as having golden skin far lighter than Esch. Like most of the other boys who are friends with the Batiste brothers, Manny has taken it upon himself to have sex with Esch. But unlike the other boys, Esch considers herself to be in love with Manny and refuse to have sex with anyone else after having sex with Manny. The other boys respect this boundary, showing that they perhaps respect Esch more than Manny does. The love Esch has for Manny is very much unrequited. During sex Manny refuses any touch or kiss, only using Esch as a sexual object. Meanwhile he is living with Shaliyah, with whom he has an on-and-off relationship. The contrast in how these two girls are treated is stark. Manny is himself light-skinned, and in every interaction with Esch it is clear he considers her to be beneath him, refusing to even speak to her in front of others. Shaliyah is light-skinned, and to her Manny is flirty and a gentleman in public, he is proud to show her off. Manny talks about how females become weaker after giving birth and nurturing children, referring to it as the “price of being female” (Ward 2017; 96). To this Esch thinks, “I wonder if he ever told her that about weakness. If he ever called her female, bit it off at the end like underripe sugarcane when he said it?” (ibid.). Manny’s opinions hold a sexist undertone, but his degree of sexism may be dependent on the girl or woman in question and the colour of her skin. With Esch it is clear that he sees her as nothing more than a sexual object for his satisfaction, while his light-skinned girlfriend gets a different treatment entirely. He would not call his light-skinned girlfriend weak because of her gender or if she entered motherhood.

If the colourism stopped at the different treatment of these two girls by Manny it could be argued that it was solely based on the characteristics of the individual girls, but the

colourism with Manny and examples in the novel go further than that. The oversexualisation of Esch goes beyond Manny, showing that each of her brothers' friends who take advantage of her see her as a sexual object rather than a person. But Esch is not the only character whom is treated negatively compared to others due to colourism. The whole Batiste family are very dark-skinned. The eldest brother Randall is a skilled basketball player for the school's team which has earned him respect among his peers, but this respect does not necessarily extend to the rest of the family. Manny and Randall are best friends, and Manny claims that Randall is like family to him, but Randall eventually calls him out for how he has treated the rest of his family, "that's the problem (...). I'm the only one" (Ward 2017; 202). Randall's skill and potential for opportunities others in the community do not have because of his basketball abilities has gained him respect, support, admiration and friendship from those who would otherwise see themselves as above him due to his dark skin, such as Manny. Because the rest of Randall's family do not have the same opportunities of escaping Bois Sauvage they are not given the same respect and instead seen as beneath him because they are darker skinned than he is.

### **Esch's Pregnancy**

Esch is in the process of becoming a mother, having found out she is pregnant at the end of the second chapter of the book. The father of the baby is Manny, but he wants nothing to do with either Esch or the baby, when told about the pregnancy his reaction is "'I ain't got nothing here,' he says. Manny blinks at me when he says it. Looks at me head-on, for the second time ever. 'Nothing'" (Ward 2017; 203). Manny considers Esch and the baby to be nothing to him, underlining that he saw her as nothing but a sexual object in any of their encounters. His age of nineteen would also classify their sexual encounters as statutory rape, as Esch is below the age of consent. Having been abandoned, Esch is now fifteen years old and pregnant, living in poverty, and with no support from the baby's father. Every idealised version of the American family is already far out of her reach.

As would be natural in her position as a pregnant teenager, Esch considers the options she has, but her position of living in poverty in the sacrifice zone means her options are highly limited. Starting with how she became pregnant, her choices were already limited. She remembers condom wrappers when thinking back to all her sexual encounters, but at all times she has been dependent on the boy to provide any form of protection. Birth control pills or other female birth control is out of her reach, she has no prescription and continues she



“wouldn’t have money to get them if I did, don’t have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the health department” (Ward 2017; 102). In addition to being exposed to male lust, her poverty causes a lack of access to birth control which also exposes her to unwanted pregnancy.

Finding herself pregnant, Esch explores her options based on the knowledge she has gained through the means available to her. She has no other women in her life, so the information she has been able to gather is what she has overheard from other girls at school

These are conversations I snatch from the air like we take down clothes that have crusted dry on a clothesline. The girls say that if you’re pregnant and you take a month’s worth of birth control pills, it will make your period come on. Say if you drink bleach, you get sick, and it will make what will become the baby come out. Say if you hit yourself really hard in the stomach, throw yourself on the metal edge of a car and it hits you low enough to call bruises, it could bring a miscarriage. Say that this is what you do when you can’t afford an abortion, when you can’t have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside of you. (...) I could find something big enough and hard enough to jump on: Daddy’s dump truck hood, Daddy’s tractor, one of the old washing machines out in the yard. We have bleach in the laundry room.

Only thing I wouldn’t be able to find is the birth control pills (Ward 2017; 102).

One need not be a doctor to understand how horrific medical advice this is, likely to cause great damage to Esch herself regardless of the effect it would have on the fetus. Esch realises that none of the options are any real options to her, determining that in actuality she has none. She is forced into unwilling motherhood. The information she has picked up by listening to those around her, proves how uneducated Esch is in regard to her own health and particularly reproductive health. This is in contrast to Esch being an excellent English student and referencing Greek mythology throughout the novel. She is intelligent and as such breaks several negative stereotypes of African-Americans and teenage mothers. It is explicitly when it comes to health that Esch is uneducated.

### **Lack of Health Care**

The lack of knowledge surrounding health is directly connected with Esch and her family’s lack of access to health care, which is a theme throughout the lives of all in Bois Sauvage and the Batiste family especially as they are presented as the poorest family in this area that is already the poorest in the US. All of the members of the Batiste family have at some point in their lives suffered by their lack of access to health care. The biggest tragedy to befall the family was the loss of their mother in childbirth. Junior was born at home in his

parents' bed, leading to his mother bleeding out. She was still alive when leaving the house to go to the hospital, but it is unknown whether she ever made it that far. The massive cost of health care in the US and the poverty of the family is likely what forced Rose to give birth in her own home without any type of health personnel present. It is impossible for the reader to know if she would have survived giving birth in a hospital, but her chances of survival would have been improved. Her final pregnancy, the one which ended up killing her, was an accidental one. It is likely to assume that Esch's mother faced similar issues of affordability of birth control as her daughter, causing the expenses of healthcare to kill her in two different ways in the same pregnancy and birth. The hospital only became an option to the family when it was already too late, the risk of massive hospital bills more intimidating than the risk of losing a parent and wife.

The only other member of the Batiste family to be admitted to hospital was the father, Claude Batiste, after losing two fingers on his hand. The only stable income of the family was his disability cheque, making losing the second parent and his following income a greater risk to the family than the risk of massive hospital bills. However, this is likely not the only time Claude needed health care. Not much is said on his disability, other than that it was an accident at work and that he now receives disability pay. The most prominent aspect of Claude's character is his alcoholism and accompanying potential for anger and violence. Although not explicitly mentioned, there are no signs of Claude being alcoholised in Esch's memories before the mother's death and before the accident. The alcohol takes up a significant amount of the family's finances but is far more affordable than any health care would be. There is a likelihood that the alcoholism is in fact a form of self-medication, an argument supported by his children's willingness to provide him with alcohol even after the hurricane has destroyed everything else in their lives as well as the fact that although not supporters of his drinking they do not hold it to be a personal fault.

### **Generational Consequences of Racism**

The focus of this thesis is on the concept of race. It is therefore important to point out the systematic and generational nature of these issues. Poverty, lack of healthcare, sacrifice zones, the unique struggles of motherhood in these difficult circumstances, as well as colourism and practical segregation all are connected with issues of racism. The financial and social disadvantages affecting African-Americans stemming from the time of slavery are still affecting African-Americans today. Despite the development of the country and the

improvement of life for African-Americans in US society over the centuries, those living in the worst poverty have been excluded from opportunities that have arisen for others. For the Batiste family circumstances have changed little over the generations, making any form of advancement in society extremely difficult. It is racial prejudice that has taken away any opportunities and deemed them as disposable people which in turn forces these issues upon them.

### **Esch's Motherhood and Alternative Infrastructures of Care**

Bares points out that despite the circumstances of her pregnancy, Ward never paints Esch as an illegitimate mother. The standard American is a white man, and the standard American mother and family is a married woman, with a house and stable income, who then start having children at an appropriate age. Esch fits in none of these categories. Single teenage mothers, particularly from minority groups, tend to be painted as illegitimate mothers, less valuable and not as good parents as those who fall within the standard. The narrative pushed in popular culture has often been that these may be the ones bringing life to the child, but that the child should then be adopted to a more legitimate mother. Ward never does this with Esch. Adoption is never seen as an option, instead the focus is on Esch's potential as a mother regardless of the circumstances. It is the baby that "gives me that name as if it is mine: *Mama*" (Ward 2017; 219). It is the act of having a child that makes her a mother, any other circumstances are irrelevant. Esch is as a legitimate mother as any other. Although her family is an atypical one, it is still presented as a legitimate family, strengthening Esch's role as a legitimate mother rather than being another cause for her to be seen as illegitimate.

Esch's circumstances will affect the life of her child, but rather than painting it out as a flaw of the mother, Ward shows the alternative infrastructures of care within the community. Society as a whole have abandoned the people of Bois Sauvage to some extent, in the sense that there are little to no safety nets provided for them. Claude is on disability cheques because his accident happened at work, and Junior attended the Head Start program for children of low-income families, but aside from that, the family are on their own. Junior also had to reach a certain age before he was allowed into the program, a period of time where the family still had need for child care. A lot of the burden fell on Randall and Esch to take care of their younger brother, starting when he came home from the hospital, despite Esch being only eight years old at the time. As the older children went to school, Junior was taken care of by an older woman in Bois Sauvage who provided childcare to people in the area at a fee. For

her it was an income, but it also provided an invaluable service to the community. The first person outside the family and Manny to find out that Esch is pregnant is Big Henry, the caring family friend who among other things take the Batistes into his home after the hurricane. He is the only friend of her brothers that have not attempted to have sex with Esch and instead see her fully as a person. He is the first person to offer an alternative form of care for Esch's child. When told this child has no father, he tells her; "This baby got a daddy, Esch. (...) This baby got plenty daddies" (Ward 2017; 255). By this he insinuates that he and the community as a whole, including all the friends of her brothers, will help raise and take care of this child. Ward is showing an alternative form of family, that rather than limit itself to blood relations includes the entire community. Despite poverty and the difficult circumstances brought upon the community because of systemic racial issues, the community has created its own system of taking care of its inhabitants.

### **Hurricane Katrina**

As Clark points out, one of the main characters of this novel is Hurricane Katrina. Although only physically present for the second to last chapter, her presence is evident throughout the novel. At first, she seems only a figment of Claude Batiste's imagination, gradually confirmed by external sources, until eventually the reality of her comes crashing into the lives of the characters. Every other aspect of the novel is fictional but based on events that could have taken place and circumstances that are reality for some. Hurricane Katrina was real and experienced by Ward herself, as mentioned in her author's note at the end of the book. The main focus in the aftermath of the hurricane was however on New Orleans. By making Katrina such a prominent figure in her novel and placing it in the poorest area of Mississippi, Ward is shining a spotlight on the consequences of the hurricane for people in this area which has previously been largely ignored by society compared to those of New Orleans.

In the days leading up to the hurricane people start preparing. People are doing everything to secure homes and properties, and as the hurricane grows in strength more and more is needed to be able to make it through the storm. There is a racial divide in how this happens. Esch and Randall visit the farm of the white people and are able to see the preparations done there. Every window is boarded up with pieces of wood that cover everything that might be broken by wind and debris. The livestock was brought inside, and the barn covered and secured as much as possible. Every precaution possible has been made

in order for the farm to survive with as little damage as possible. This is in contrast with the Batiste home. Their windows are boarded up, but because they had to use whatever was available to them there is still a sliver of every window that is uncovered simply because they do not have enough wood. They are forced to leave their chickens to fend for themselves. They have stock piled food and water in order to survive without electricity or fire, mainly peas and noodles, the cheapest options left at the store, eggs from their own chickens, and water in case their water supply is polluted. The initial disparity in finances of the two families also means that what the Batiste family have they are more likely to lose because they are unable to secure it as safely as the white people on the farm.

The most significant difference between the Batiste, as well as the African-American population of Bois Sauvage, and the white people on the farm in regard to the hurricane is whether they follow the mandatory evacuation or attempt to survive it in their homes. Bares argues the insistence on mobility as the only desirable outcome is ableist and that the defiant act of staying must be seen in context of the history of force coerced unto black bodies. This thesis would argue that in addition to being ableist, the idea of evacuation as the only correct option over anything else is also discriminatory based of financial situation which, as seen previously, is closely linked with consequences of racial discrimination over generations. The clear racial difference in who decides to follow the mandatory evacuation and who does not emphasise this existing racial and financial divide.

The choice not to evacuate is part of the Batiste family's history. Regardless of the category of the hurricane, the Batiste family have always stayed in their home, "all these Batistes been living up here all these years through all these hurricanes and they been all right" (Ward 2017; 220). In line with Bares' argument that not evacuating is an act of defiance connected to the history of coercion upon black bodies, it is also an act that must be seen as the ultimate act of bodily autonomy, which Esch has been lacking throughout the novel. Not only her, but the entire community are regaining their bodily autonomy through this act according to Bares' argument. It could also be argued that although connected with some autonomy, the act of not evacuating cannot be seen separately from the lack of opportunities if they leave. Everything the family has of value is connected with Bois Sauvage and the Pit, leaving would include potentially starting over with even less in a place where everyone else already has more.

As the hurricane fully hits Bois Sauvage, the consequences on the Pit are disastrous. Because of the digging and removing of earth that created the pit, there is now a creek on the property that has created a pond and little earth to soak up any of the water. During the

hurricane, this combination causes the entire property to flood and the house the family is in ends up being taken by the water and they are forced to escape into the attic of the run-down house of their grandparents which saves their lives. There is thus a direct connection between their grandfather being taken financially advantage of by his white bosses who wanted his earth and the potentially lethal danger the current family find themselves in. This imagery shows the generational aspect of racialised oppression and how current African-Americans are still forced to live with the consequences of what was done to their ancestors. In all of this, Katrina brought attention to existing racialised issues and injustices, as argued by both Bares and Clark.

### **Dividing the Then and the Now**

The other major role of Katrina in the novel is how she serves as a dividing line in the story of the Batiste family and Bois Sauvage, before and after. Esch can sense this change before the hurricane arrives; “*Tomorrow, I think, everything will be washed clean*” (Ward 2017; 205). This thought enters her mind as she argues with Manny after having told him about the baby. Already, she can tell that the problems she is facing will not be as important after the hurricane has arrived. Everything will be washed clean, what has brought her to this difficult moment will cease to matter because the world she faces after the hurricane will be different.

In the world that exists after the hurricane, what matters has completely changed and what separates people has vanished. As the family go further in to Bois Sauvage, the consequences of Katrina become gradually more apparent; “every house had faced the hurricane, and every house had lost” (Ward 2017; 242). The extent of the damage varies, but everyone lost something. Instead of the material disparity that had previously been important for every aspect of life, now all that matters is that people have survived, the only real value remaining is the value of human life. This not only applies to Bois Sauvage, but also the neighbouring town of St. Cathrine in which the demography and financial situation had been very different before the hurricane.

The gas station, the yacht club, and all the old white-columned homes that faced the beach, that made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever when we came here with Daddy, piled in his truck, for gas or chips or bait on our swimming days, gone. Not ravaged, not rubble, but completely gone (Ward 2017; 253).

The life of every person in the area had previously been determined by what one’s ancestors had, by the generational wealth or poverty of each family, Katrina has now evened out the

playing field. Everyone has lost practically everything, the hurricane not discriminating against those in mansions and those in small run-down homes. Everyone has to start over, regardless of previous position in life. Instead, the greater community has been forced to come together to aid in each other's continued survival. Whether that be shelter, food, water or any other form of help.

This drastic change in everyone's circumstances also changes the perception of race. Almost every character throughout the novel is described by the colour of their skin, both characters named, and people not named who Esch meets in passing. It becomes a defining characteristic of each person, hence the ability to perceive colourism in the treatment of characters or the skin colour of the people on the farm. After Katrina, in the course of two pages, skin colour gradually stops holding meaning in the perception of the characters. Leaving the African-American area of Bois Sauvage and entering the neighbouring, mainly white and more affluent area of St. Catherine, Esch's perception of the people she meets changes along the way. The first people she singles out are two old men described as white and black sitting together, these people she witnesses without speaking to. The next person is someone Esch and the other people in the car actually speak to, a woman described as either white or light-skinned black, who ask if they have any food which they provide. This is the last person whose skin colour is described, and Esch is unable to determine if she is white or African-American. The group still continue to see unknown people along their journey, but none are described by skin colour. Seeing the familiar gym she had been in only a few days previously, Esch realises; "Suddenly there is a great split between now and then, and I wonder where the world where that day happened has gone, because we are not in it" (Ward 2017; 251). Katrina has wiped everything clean, allowing all to start over on equal footing. The inherited poverty and wealth distributed by racial injustice over centuries has been washed clean, and the contours of an actual post-race world based on the value of each human and of community is emerging in the rubble left by the storm.

### **Ambivalent Ending**

Despite all of the changes and the divide of before and after created by Katrina, the ending of the novel is somewhat unclear. The problems that cease to matter in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane will come to the surface again. Esch is still a pregnant teenager living in poverty and a limited safety net, not fitting within the standardised model of motherhood. This could have been resolved by adding a marriage plot with Esch and Big

Henry, but Ward has deliberately avoided this. She has instead chosen a more ambivalent ending that both continues Esch and her family's struggles, but also does not invalidate the struggles they have already faced by resolving everything in a typical happy ending. The novel ending with both a potential for limiting racial issues going forward and a continuation of individual struggles, but with the aid of the community, is ambivalent yet also shows how the potential for change is present and dependent on people's actions. Although not a clear call to action, it uses the empathy it has produced throughout the novel to emphasise importance of accepting collective responsibility and try to promote change from the system that existed before the hurricane.



## 7. Comparative Reading of the Novels

*The Hate U Give* and *Salvage the Bones* take place in very different places in the US and with very different circumstances for the characters' lives, but there are still important similarities and common themes that speak to important aspects of the African-American experience in contemporary US. This is true both of the issues faced by the characters and how they have developed within society, as well as how the individual characters, particularly the main characters, are portrayed. The choices done by the authors in their writing and their differentiation between the intended audiences show the relevant alternative approaches to race and how they are reflected in the texts.

### Disposable People

The main issue facing the groups of African-American characters in both novels is their role as disposable people in the eyes of US society. In the case of Starr and the people of Garden Heights the threat is both from violence and the damage caused by the prevalence of drugs and crime as the only viable options for many in the population. The violence takes form of both illegal violence at the hands of criminal gangs that have been allowed by constant under-policing to run the area through fear, and the legalised violence of police caused by systemic racism and intermittent over-policing in times of great media attention. For Esch and the people of Bois Sauvage the violence is not as direct and caused by individual perpetrators, but instead is a form of slow violence that is a continuation of generations of slow violence towards the poor African-American population in the area. Both areas are plagued by toxic conditions. In Bois Sauvage it is the direct destruction of the environment and the likely dangerous nature of the available jobs, while in Garden Heights much of the problematic toxic influence is caused by drugs and the following drug dealing and gang crime. Both areas can be categorised as sacrifice zones, with these destructive elements causing significant damage and potentially death to the people living in the areas at the financial benefit to unknown outside financially strong individuals, which are highly likely to be part of the majority white population.

The characters being treated as disposable people by society exposes the systematic racism and inescapable racial issues in their areas. A main purpose for both novels is to go against the narrative presented by some of the current US as a post-racial nation by exposing and exemplifying existing issues faced by many African-Americans today. Although *Salvage the Bones* was first published in 2011 and *The Hate U Give* in 2017 and there having been

significant developments of the perception of African-American people in the US both between the publications of the novels and today, the issues faced by the characters are still relevant today. In their works, both Thomas and Ward expose the systemic nature of the issues and how they carry into the everyday lives of individuals. Using different degrees of extreme situations, with Hurricane Katrina as a once in a generation event and the killing of an unarmed African-American person by police as an extreme but more common event, the novels are able to expose these systemic issues by forcing them to reach a peak in which the cumulation of the complex issues are more difficult to hide.

### **Portrayal of African-American Characters**

The portrayal of the characters themselves are important to how the novels attempt to affect the perspective of the reader towards African-American people. Both Starr and Esch are presented as likable, intelligent and caring, but at the same time also not infallible characters. Starr is initially somewhat ashamed of being from Garden Heights and avoid introducing the people there to her wealthier friends from Williamson, more importantly to the story she denies knowing Khalil to protect herself and the normalcy of her life and shows some proclivity to violence in the riots before deciding against it. These are some of the potentially perceived flaws within her characters, but they are simultaneously understandable to the reader, perhaps especially based on her age and her development post Khalil's murder which changes her to be proud of where she came from. Esch's flaws present differently, more dependent on circumstances than based in character development in the same way Starr's are. She is also violent in some cases, but based solely on moments of fear and anger, such as hitting Manny after he claimed she and their child was nothing to him. For both characters the actions may be seen as flaws while simultaneously being based in understandable reactions to difficult situations. There are other characters around them that are far more flawed. Esch's father is a violent alcoholic who at times make his children's lives difficult. *The Hate U Give* has both Isha and Brenda, who act unfairly towards their children because of drug use, and King who is a gang leader and have little to no redeemable qualities. The characters are flawed, but both Thomas and Ward illustrates how circumstances of their lives shape the flaws of each character and make them understandable and in most cases forgivable.

## **Relating the Novels to Hughes and Hurston**

The debate of Hughes and Hurston is based on the responsibility the African-American artist has toward African-American people as a whole. Hughes argues that every African-American artist has a responsibility to uplift African-American people and must write first and foremost as an African-American and as an artist second. Hurston believed that the African-American people were already uplifted, and that each artist could therefore be a writer first and African-American second. Including significantly flawed characters goes against Hughes's view of uplifting African-Americans, but although both Thomas and Ward have flawed characters their approach to writing African-American characters reside on separate sides of this debate, which in turn relates to their respective theoretical approaches to race.

Starr starts the novel living a life in which she strives for what may be deemed white ideals, but throughout her story learns to embrace and be proud of being from Garden Heights. Despite the tendencies toward white ideals, being African-American has always been a vital part of her identity. Having learned about important figures and messages in the struggle for civil rights and the antiracist struggle at a very young age, being African-American is a foundational part of her identity. Even at the predominantly white school of Williamson, her skin colour is practically a badge of who she is, everything she is and does is connected with her role as African-American in some way. Even when living a life close to the white ideal, her African-Americanness is an inherent part of her. Thomas here uses an essentialist approach. Regardless of any other circumstances in life, being African-American is the main foundational aspect of their identity. It is true whether it is DeVante who was forced to become a gang member at a young age, for Khalil who was killed without cause, Maverick who ran his own store, and Uncle Carlos the police officer. Whether they want to or not, they are connected through the common experience of being African-American and as such belong to the same community. Throughout the novel, Starr also learns to be proud of her African-American heritage throughout the novel, moving toward embracing her African-Americanness and away from the white ideal she was initially approaching.

It is without question that Esch, her family and their community has had their lives shaped by being African-American, but the main factor in regard to approach to race is how it has shaped their lives. While Esch does describe almost every person, both familiar and unfamiliar, by the colour of their skin it is not considered an inherent part of their character. Instead, skin colour is connected more to the circumstances of the person's life. The white

people are considered financially better off and living a relatively secure life. Marquise, who is lighter skinned than the Batiste family lives in a house closer to the centre of town which is much nicer than the dark-skinned main character's family but not as nice as the farm of the white people. The dark-skinned Batiste family live under the worst conditions, both with their home and their financial situation. The skin colour is an indicator of ancestors and as such which generational conditions the family has been living under. In the final chapter, after Hurricane Katrina has destroyed everything regardless of who owned it, skin colour gradually stops to matter as Esch realises how all are now on equal footing in regard to needing to rebuild their lives. It is a new world, and in that world social constructs of the old world have lost its importance. This change at the end, in and of itself, places *Salvage the Bones* within a constructivist approach to race, arguing that it is the existing social order in society that has given any meaning to racial divides.

Bringing the novels back to the Hughes and Hurston debate with the theoretical approach to race in mind, it becomes easier to see how these novels by Thomas and Ward fit into the debate.

Although Starr and her brothers go to a mainly white private school, which can be read as them striving toward the white ideal and fitting into the middle-class Hughes criticised for attempting to leave behind their African-Americanness, this is only a small part of how the Carter family relates to Garden Heights and anything to do with being African-American. Maverick is presented as a role model, and throughout the story he pushes Starr's understanding of her own role as African-American while he himself embraces strong figures of proud African-Americans. It is part of Starr's character development to learn to embrace her inherent identity of being African-American, the journey into fighting for antiracism, and learning that the most important thing is to care about the conditions for African-American people. While admitting that there are problematic actions and people among the African-American community, Thomas also shows that even flawed characters has the potential to achieve great things and develop themselves but that it is the lack of opportunities that are causing the problematic conditions society often blame African-American people for. By giving opportunities to individual characters she is showing the potential of African-American people, uplifting them in the eyes of the reader in line with Hughes's view on the writer's responsibility.

Bois Sauvage is an African-American town, but it is based on circumstance rather than the need to build an exclusively African-American community. Skin colour is important in the lives of characters because of the conditions it has caused for the individual. Ward's focus is

not on being African-American as an inherent trait for the character, but instead on exposing the conditions systemic racism and generational oppression has caused. Her characters are not created as role models or guide lines for readers to follow, instead they are characters in their own right, both for good and bad. The father is violent, alcoholic and absent in his children's lives. Esch is flawed, but intelligent and caring. The characters are created to be images of individuals rather than representatives on behalf of all African-Americans. Although race is an important aspect of the story Ward is telling, it is based on external factors rather than internal. She is not uplifting African-American people, but instead showing the realities of their lives in the current societal construct. Most of her characters are flawed humans but good humans, much like everybody else. African-Americans are already uplifted, there are the issues of systemic racism and oppression that is making life appear difficult. Although her focus on racial issues means Ward carries a responsibility for African-American people in her writing, her work is more in line with Hurston. She is taking on the role of writer first and representative of African-American people second. Race exists and gain importance only in the meeting with a society that has created conditions based on it, once those conditions and circumstances are gone race ceases to matter.

### **Author Authenticity**

Both Thomas and Ward are African-American women themselves, sharing important demographic similarities with their main characters. As authentic authors, their position as knowledgeable authorities on the subject of their works affects how the reader approaches the novels. The experiences of the characters gain a realism, and the effect the narratives have on society is thus strengthened. Instead of being theoretically possible, as would be the case if these novels written for instance by a white man. These authors mean that these books can be read as more of a snapshot of the realities of the conditions African-American girls and women live in in contemporary US society. The author authenticity of the novels allows them to become a political tool and can be used to challenge the dominant ideology of US society by telling the story of the oppressed in an indisputable way.

### **Differentiating Based on Target Audience**

The target audience for the two novels are very different, *The Hate U Give* being a YA novel targeted more towards teenagers and *Salvage the Bones* being targeted toward a more mature audience. This appears to have affected how the authors have approached race and

racial issues, each target audience carrying different potential and ways to achieve the aim of the novels to challenge the dominant ideology.

Thomas has written a novel that reads as a call to action, especially for young female African-American readers. It is educational in nature and can be used to teach its readers to embrace African-Americanness as a positive thing and to be a part of the antiracist movements. The ending of the novel is very positive, showing faith in the inevitability of antiracist change in society, encouraging its young readers to be a part of that change. Systemic racial issues are exposed in the novel with the main function of showing why the readers should be engaged in challenging the dominant ideology. Although the issues faced by the characters are complex in nature and the circumstances that have caused them are as well, they are presented to the reader in a simplified way. Most are directly spelled out by characters to make sure the reader cannot miss its meaning. Like a tutor the novel gradually builds the readers understanding and guide them towards the conclusion of why they should actively engage in the antiracist struggle and showing that it is relevant for anyone regardless of the circumstances of their life but focusing mainly on the previously often excluded group of African-American girls. The educational aim of her book has likely affected Thomas's approach to race. Essentialism allows her to create a sense of belonging to a community for her African-American reader. By embracing her role as uplifting African-Americans she builds her audience's pride in African-Americanness and strengthens her call to action.

Ward has written a book for a mature audience, evident in the more complex writing style and less direct approach to the issues she aims to expose. Instead of holding the hand of her reader and guiding them through each step aimed at pointing towards issues of systemic racism, Ward exposes the issues through showing the life of her characters and their issues, using metaphors, images and the difficulties of their situations to help the reader understand the causes of her characters' struggles. Where Thomas spells it out to her reader where the issue resides, Ward uses the contrast of life for the Batiste family with the lives of those around them, using individual events to represent the systemic and generational nature of the racially based issues. She also connects racial issues with feminist issues and other social issues, seeing how they intersect and amplify each other instead of treating each issue within a vacuum. This may also connect with Ward's choice of a constructivist approach and not treating uplifting African-Americans as her main cause. She expects her readers to be able to grasp more complex concepts. Expecting that her readers are able to see how race can be seen as constructivist, how generational issues affect the current generation, and that her characters

are flawed humans like anyone else, has allowed Ward the freedom to be a writer first and representative of African-American people second.

## Conclusion

Angie Thomas and Jesmyn Ward are continuing the tradition of African-American writers writing in an effort to improve the life conditions of all African-American, but they approach this task with different foundational views within the novels on what it means to be African-American. The purpose of this thesis is to find answers to the research questions through close reading and analysis of the novels on the basis of the relevant theory included. The research questions are: (1) How are racial issues faced by the main characters portrayed in the YA novel versus in the adult fiction novel? (2) How do Thomas and Ward approach race in their respective novels, and how do they approach their own role as African-American writers? (3) In what way do Thomas and Ward aim to affect society through *The Hate U Give* and *Salvage the Bones*?

### Racial Issues in YA Novel versus Adult Novel

Having different target audiences also means adapting the storytelling to the readers each novel aim to have. The characters of both novels face significant issues that are caused by race, for instance oppression, prejudice, or inheriting generational issues. Thomas uses her novel as an educational tool for the young people of her target audience to learn about systemic racism and the effects of it on the individual, effects that may not be as obvious through the general public discourse. In order to be sure that her educational message about racial issues gets across in a clear way she presents them through events and explain them through dialogue. It is a simplified and straight forward portrayal of racial issues, intended to guide a new generation into activism. Ward has a more mature audience and therefore uses both more complex language and more complex events and issues. Rather than presenting racial issues mostly independently as Thomas does, Ward shows how different social issues are interconnected and affect each other. In *Salvage the Bones* racial issues cannot be disconnected from other issues e.g. feminist issues or poverty. It also emphasises the generational nature of racial issues and how contemporary issues must be seen as a continuation of racism throughout US history. The portrayals of racial issues vary significantly between the YA novel and the adult fiction novel, mainly based on the existing differentials between the genres, meaning the expected ability by the reader of understanding depth and complexity.



## **Approaching Race and Writing as an African-American**

It has been established that Thomas has taken an essentialist approach to race while Ward takes on a more constructivist view, in line with their role as African-American writers along the Hughes versus Hurston debate. This can be seen as a continuation of the differences between YA and adult fiction and the following expected level of complexity. Thomas uses an essentialist approach to create community and persuade African-American readers to embrace their own African-Americanness. In doing so she is following Hughes's perspective of having a responsibility to uplift African-American people as a whole. Essentialism appears to be a better combination with educating young people on racial issues. Ward sees race from a constructivist point of view where racial issues are created by a racist society and are interconnected with other issues of marginalised and oppressed groups. The complexity with which these issues connect makes the social aspect of them clearer and forces a constructivist approach. Although Ward also has a purpose of benefitting African-American people with her novel, it is not her main purpose to uplift African-Americans as a whole, instead following more in line with Hurston. While Thomas is African-American first and writer second, Ward is a writer first as her African-American identity comes second.

## **Affecting Society**

Both novels are very political in nature as their focus is, among other things on racial issues, a highly politicised topic in US society, which makes it clear that they are aiming to be a part of public discourse and as such have an effect on society. The question is in what way they aim to achieve an effect on society. Thomas has written a book that is educational, but it is also a call to action. It is true for all potential readers, but especially for young African-American girls, a group that has previously been sidelined compared to other groups in the antiracist discourse. Her novel is aiming to awaken their political awareness and interest, bringing new and important voices into the public debate. Ward's novel is not as active in its political ambitions, it is not calling a specific group to action in the same way, but it too has political goals. Exposing racial issues and bringing them to light, showing how they have developed over generations and are affecting current generations is Ward's way of affecting society. The novel works by creating empathy for a group of people often ignored by society at large and through that empathy encourages change.

While Thomas tells the readers exactly why and how they should be fighting for change, Ward shows the issues people like her characters are facing and allows her more mature readers to understand for themselves why change is needed.

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