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Original Paper

"Roses that Grew from Concrete": Racialized Biopolitics in Angie Thomas' Fictions

Mengyue Duan[1*]

[1] School of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, Suzhou, China

[*] Mengyue Duan, School of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, Suzhou, China

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Abstract

Angie Thomas (1988-) is a contemporary African American woman writer noted for her activist identity and her examination of Black experience (particularly young adults experience) within the Black community. She has won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, and the ALA's William C. Morris Debut Award. Thomas is the author of 3 novels, including The Hate U Give *(2017),* On the Come Up *(2019) and* Concrete Rose *(2021). The three novels all involve the literary descriptions of physical discipline, power repression, and institutional manipulation experienced by African American young adults in the process of growing up, and profoundly touch upon social problems such as police brutality, systematic poverty and discourse penetration in the United States. The writing about black experience reveals that racial violence is still rampant in American society.*

Based on Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe's theories of biopolitics, this paper takes Angie Thomas's three fictions as research object, explores how biopower continues to govern and manipulate blacks in the economic, political and ideological levels via more varied means, which, to different degrees, leads to the mechanism of inclusive exclusion that reduces blacks into the killable homo sacer. *The paper further points out that the three novels demonstrate that when the black population is included in the macro governance of biopower, blacks could be utilized as the target of a society of enmity, suppressed or eliminated by the authorities as a threat to the security mechanism, and their bodies can also be commoditized as a resource for exploitation in America's racial economy. Meanwhile, the sovereign also uses ideological discourse to erase the humanity of African Americans in the media, education and other fields, making it more reasonable to oppress and manipulate blacks.*

Keywords

Angie Thomas, biopolitics, race, police brutality

1. Introduction

Angie Thomas, born in 1988, has been recognized as a talented new voice in African-American literature with her novels including *The Hate U Give* (2017), *On the Come Up* (2019) and *Concrete Rose* (2021), all debuted at number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list, bringing her international recognition. Considering herself an activist, Angie Thomas explored such contemporary and thought-provoking topics such as racism, police brutality, inequality and privilege in her three fictions, which are closely related to the contemporary Black Lives Matter Movement. Thomas's first novel *The Hate U Give* (2017), which won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award (USA), the Waterstones Children's Book Prize (UK), and the ALA's William C. Morris Debut Award, bravely and unapologetically rips into a subject—the police's unscrupulous killing of Black people and the prejudice that exists in the legal system. Her distinctively incisive and realistic presentation of police brutality in this novel establishes her as an activist who tries to "make something that is so political seem personal" (Arthaud). Thomas's second novel, *On the Come Up* (2019), delineates the story of an 16-year-old African-American girl who was raised in impoverished conditions yet overcame it all to become a well-known rapper, guiding its readers to delve into police brutality, white privilege, and the larger climate of racism designed to disempower and impoverish youth of color. In *Concrete Rose* (2021), the author shifts the narrative from young African-American girls to African-American teens, making the issues explored throughout the novel more oriented toward the poverty and racism dilemmas faced by males during their teenage years. Notably, in the aforementioned fictions, issues surrounding the plight of African Americans, such as police brutality, racism, trauma, and enmity in society, are discussed with varying emphasis and featured with distinct characteristics of their age.

Since Thomas's novels have made an impact in a short time, they have aroused a certain amount of interest among scholars, with research carried out surrounding police brutality, racism, feminism, and respectability politics. Focusing on *The Hate U Give*, Barbara Gf öllner (2020) lays emphasis on police brutality and the production of the black body in it. She reveals the fact that from the days of slavery to the present, "the numerous deaths of innocent people of color at the hands of officers have long remained invisible" (p. 11). Considering Thomas's identity as an African American writer and an activist, it is hard for critics to complete their studies without any mention of racism. Using racial prejudice theory by McLemore, Yusrina Dinar Prihatika and Muh Arif Rokhman (2020) analyze racial prejudice towards African Americans in *The Hate U Give*, remarking that "racism is only packaged into something new, different and in the smoothest way possible, adapted to the interests of government corporates" (p. 54). Based on the concept of feminist orientation, Jodi Alfando and Delvi Wahyuni (2022) expose the double oppression endured by black female protagonists Brianna, her mom Jay, and her Aunty in *On the Come Up*. Besides the discussion about feminist perspectives in Angie Thomas's works, the critique of Respectability Politics is another topic that launches heated discussion. Precious D. Thompson (2020), for instance, argues that the protagonist Starr in *The Hate U Give* performs

Respectability Politics, but later finds it "does not secure her from the discrimination and abuse of being a black person" (p. 4). Gabrielle Owen (2019) takes *Monster* and *The Hate U Give* as research objects and believes that "both novels grapple with the politics of respectability, to very different effects" (p. 239).

The above literature review shows that some research that has been done on the current state of violent police service in American society, the racial oppression suffered by African Americans, and the differential treatment of Blacks by the government and the law, rather than examining these social phenomena as a systematic exclusion mechanism linked to the concept of biopolitics. Based on the previous scholarship, this article goes one step further by exploring the insidious mechanism of exclusion and enmity in contemporary America that have reduced African Americans to what Judith Butler called "precarious lives". In this dynamic process, what is becoming visible is that Angie Thomas enlightens those African American young adults who come from rags about methods of resistance against racialized biopower. By projecting voice toward outside, appealing relation of care, and ignoring stereotypes, the protagonists in the novels succeed in reassuring their position in the world as an independent and dignified individual.

Biopolitics is a modern point of view embodying the hidden connection between national governance and individual existence. Although the term was coined by Kjellén, it was Michel Foucault who was responsible for incorporating natural life into the mechanisms and calculations of national power, making it a major philosophical concept in academic circles. It is worth noting that Foucault classifies biopower into two basic forms. The first one is *an anatomo-politics of the human body*, which is the disciplinary mechanism centered on "the body as a machine"; the second is *a biopolitics of the population*, focusing on "the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 139). Foucault gives numerous examples of biopolitical control including "ratio of births to deaths, the rate of production, the fertility of a population, and so on" (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 243), which relate the notion of biopolitics to the discourses and disciplines of demography, epidemiology and biology. Foucault further stresses that "in a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable, where 'killing' is not limited to direct murder but also includes forms of 'indirect murder' such as increased risk of death or even 'political death' in the form of expulsion and rejection, for instance" (p. 256).

Primarily motivated by Foucault's concepts, alongside with Carl Schmitt's political philosophy, Giorgio Agamben carried his studies of biopolitics for the purpose of revealing the inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism. In his famous work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben clarifies his profound concept of *homo sacer*, referring to a person who is persecuted for violating divine or human laws, forbidden to be sacrificed. A *homo sacer* can be killed and those who kill him will not be punished (p. 71). Agamben regards the life of "homo sacer," which is exposed

to the threat of death, as bare life, and considers it as the basic element to be excluded in the construction of political community by sovereign power (Zhang, p. 89). The process of a natural person being reduced to a *homo sacer* is the inclusive exclusion, where an element is included solely by virtue of being excluded. According to Agamben, Western politics has been predicated on its inclusive exclusion of natural life since the time of ancient Greece (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 1-12). On the interrelationship between biopolitics and racism, Agamben goes further than Foucault. While Foucault uses "prison" as a metaphor for modern society, Agamben regards "concentration camp" as a model of modern community form and points out that "if today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*" (p. 115). Achille Mbembe, a political philosopher from Cameroon, draws both on the former concept of biopolitics and a decolonial approach (often inspired by Frantz Fanon) and conceives of "necropolitics". His theory is based on the ideas of Foucault and Agamben, but it radicalizes and racializes the concept of biopolitics, making it more relevant to marginalized groups in real society (especially black groups) than to the white mainstream.

Using theories of biopolitics by Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe, this article is aimed at analyzing how skin color becomes a biopolitical apparatus for people to distinguish enemies and companions, how African Americans are thrown into a poverty cycle through biopolitics, and how the insidious exclusion mechanism operates in African Americans' daily lives in Angie Thomas's three novels: *The Hate U Give*, *On the Come Up* and *Concrete Rose*. This article argues that the biopolitical mechanisms of exclusion and enmity pose a threat to African Americans through police brutality, commodification of black bodies, and inflammatory discourse in mass media and education system. First and foremost, the ubiquity and unpreventability of police violence is one manifestation of the inclusive exclusion mechanism. Police harassment is one American experience that African Americans share, but they are excluded from another, which is police protection. Furthermore, the drug war and colored incarceration endow violent policing with a veneer of legitimacy, and black people became necessary casualties of the war against crime. Their bodies are commodified, and the benefits the government extracts from them continue to drive the racial economy of American society. Besides, biopower manipulates the mass media and education system to justify the at-fault police officer through the influence of intellectual discourse, and tries to make police brutality reasonable by criminalizing African Americans. The struggle and suffering of African Americans in today's American society reflected in the three novels is undoubtedly a powerful appeal to the public not to be deceived by the optimistic idea that racism no longer exists in the post-racial era. Sovereign oppression of African Americans continues, and the means of control become more insidious. The gist of all three novels echoes the contemporary Black Lives Matter Movement and has a realistic reference to today's American society.

2. Biopower over African Americans in a Society of Enmity and Exclusion

In all three of Thomas's works, African Americans, regardless of their age or status, are neglected, despised, oppressed, or even killed by people from races deemed superior by the state: they are the targets of social hostility and defined as lives that are not worth living. From a biopolitical point of view, it is suggested that the unequal and bias performance of extreme violence against black people is a racializing process that treats them as *homo sacer*, placing them within embodied racial "camps". Therefore, taking political, economic and cultural perspectives as the main considerations, the purpose of this section is to take an in-depth look at how biopower permeates all aspects of African American's daily lives and thrown them into marginalized situations, so as to reaffirm Ta-Nehisi Coates's thought-provoking view in *Between the World and Me* (2015), "But race is the child of racism, not the father" (p. 7).

2.1 Police Brutality Imposed on African American Teenagers

In her three books, Angie Thomas symbolizes the biopower's exclusionary processes, and among them, what ranks first is the use of deadly force and brutality by the police against African Americans. The number of criminals incarcerated in U.S. prisons has been gradually increasing since the 1970s; the country's incarceration rates are not only much higher than those of other established Western nations, but also much higher than those of China and India, which are the world's two most populous countries. The U.S. accounts for only 5% of the world's population, but holds 25% of the world's incarcerated criminals in its prisons (Kaeble & Cowhig, p. 35). In addition, other penal measures in the United States are also expanding, such as the growing population of community sentences.

In addition to the disproportionately high incarceration rates and inmate populations, the racist character of the policing culture in the United States is equally striking. In terms of the racial characterization of the inmate population, prisons predominantly house minority populations such as African-Americans and Hispanics. James Buehler (2017, p. 296) notes that "substantial evidence indicates that Black individuals and, to a lesser extent, Hispanic individuals are more likely than White individuals to be stopped by police or arrested". The police use Stop, Question and Frisk policies (SQF) to target African Americans with a "tough on crime" agenda. The police use punishment as an instrument of social control, and naturally, the targets of this punishment are the bodies and lives of African Americans.

While Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe have mostly focused on extreme spatial examples of legal suspension such as concentration camps, plantations, colonies, and refugee camps on the border in their works, novelist Angie Thomas goes further to reveal that the biopower, which treats biological life as an object of governmentality, can permeate any corner of a democratic state. Agamben discovers that the formation of a political community can only be realized when certain people are excluded and deprived of legal subjects. These spaces of exclusion are relationally established when police, prison guards, or other agents of sovereignty treat a segment of the population as if they are killable. In this

case, colored people are not excluded because they enter an excised space, but rather an excised space is created because they are excluded.

In *The Hate U Give*, Khalil, an unarmed African-American teenager who accepted an unprovoked stop and frisk by a white police officer, was brutally robbed of his life by police gunfire. Ms. Ofrah, an activist, told Starr and her parents that the white police officer mistook Khalil's hairbrush for a gun because "the handle was thick enough, black enough, for him to assume it was a gun". Because of Khalil's dark skin color, One-Fifteen only suspiciously "saw" a gun, and he shot it because he expected it to be there. Officer One-Fifteen, like other white police officers monitoring the black community, made a hostile assumption that African American young adults who don't follow their instructions exactly must be criminals.

In Angie Thomas's fictional neighborhood—Garden Heights, African-American adults who are more experienced in the police interaction than teenagers tend to have the foresight to give their children pivotal warning. As Starr puts it, when she was twelve years old, her parents had two conversations with her, "One was the usual birds and bees. The other talk was about what to do if a cop stopped me" (p. 24). And Starr's father Maverick also kept her mother's words firmly in mind when he was still a teenager, then he later passed this warning to his daughter Starr, which by no means proves the fact that the right way to deal with the police is the key to surviving in the black community.

> "Don't give the police a reason to pull you over. If they do—"
>
> "Keep my hands visible, don't make no sudden moves, and only speak when they speak to me." I know the talk by heart. Ma and Pops drilled it into my head since I was seven (*Concrete Rose*, p. 263).

For Agamben, the act of treating someone as though they are 'bare life', without any basic rights, or as though they are not a part of the polity, is what establishes exception (Agamben, 1998, p. 83). When it comes to dealing with the police, African Americans always seem to be in a state of exception—they are being "included in one American experience (police harassment) and excluded from another (police protection)" (Carbado, p. 636).

And even more harmful is the fact that the perpetrators of violent law enforcement do not have to be only the police, but also lower-level authority figures who are relevant to the political communities. Judith Butler makes this point when she argues that sovereignty "power is no longer restrained within the sovereign form of the state" (p. 54) but has become so pervasive as to reach into and synergize different areas of the state apparatus. And in today's racist policing incidents, the police are undoubtedly agents of sovereignty that on behalf of the government. Sovereignty empowers the "petty sovereigns" to exercise, in a state of exception, the biopower to reduce African Americans to what Agamben notes the *homo sacer*. At this moment, African American lives are excluded from the law and there is no longer any legal responsibility for killing them.

In *On the Come Up*, there are also episodes in which the protagonist encounters violent law enforcement, but unlike in *The Hate U Give*, the enforcers are changed from police to school guard, and the venue of law enforcement is changed from the street to the school that should be the students' sanctuary. The shooting of Khalil, an unarmed black boy, by a white police officer with total impunity in *The Hate U Give* has led to massive protests and riots of the colored group. African American residents in the Garden Heights are terrified of violent police brutality, and feel that their lives are being threatened. *On the Come Up* is set in the aftermath of the riots. The protagonist Bri describes the atmosphere in the neighborhood this way, "Seems normal, but things haven't been the same since the riots" (p. 55). Not that the Garden was ever a utopia, in addition to worrying about gangs like GDs and Crowns, African Americans have to worry about the cops too. The school guards put dark-skinned students through an extra security screening, even though the metal detector didn't beep when they went through. The school guards claimed "they wanted to be "sure" (p. 62). Bri, on the other hand, encountered treatment that was even more overtly racist and exclusionary than that. In addition to being asked to go through the metal detector again when it didn't beep, she was also asked to hand over her bag. She righteously refused the guard's rude request, then she recalls that "before I know it, my chest hits the ground first, then my face is pressed against the cold floor. Long's knee goes onto my back as Tate removes my backpack" (p. 64). One of the guards Long also called her "li'l hoodlum" (p. 64). The two school guards are not cops with any guns, but they are endowed with the power to suspect, search, and punish African Americans at will. By looking at the recurring episodes of police enforcement violence in Thomas's novels, it is clear that the state of exception is not only the result of creating a certain designated space such as a concentration camp, but can also act directly on a certain body.

Foucault refers to his definition of racism in *Society Must Be Defended*: "It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die" (Foucault, 2003. p. 254). He argues that racism is inextricably linked to biopower, and that racism, as a prerequisite, provides a perfect state of implementation for biopower to exercise its right to kill. Thus, police violence in the United States is a biopolitical form of state power, ostensibly to maintain public order, but in fact to create a spectacle of punishment, with the ultimate goal of strengthening and consolidating state power.

2.2 Commodification of Poor Blacks in Garden Heights

Achille Mbembe noted that today, in the context of globalization, one of the distinguishing features of Western democracies is borderization. Through borderization, sovereignty has the ability to create a group of people who live on the edge of life, whose living conditions are so perishing that to be alive means to be in constant revolt against death (*Necropolitics*, pp. 37-38). By inflicting violence on these lives classified as superfluous, the zones of indistinction in Agamben's argument, which mark the boundary between political and natural life as a being that may not be sacrificed but may be killed, are extended to the realm of economy.

In Angie Thomas's three fictions, the mechanisms pauperizing and exploiting blacks are implemented in different forms, of which racial violence is overtly connected with biopower. The most eye-catching racial product is the ubiquitous law-enforcement scene on the streets of the United States, where white law-enforcement officers arrest black criminals and the blacks being punished are "undoubtedly" guilty of a crime. The punished black body also has its own social significance, intimidating other people of color and embodying the power of white supremacy. Such spectacles reassure passersby that society is in good hands and that state protection is not for naught.

This public spectacle also occurred in *The Hate U Give*, after the shooting, Khalil's body was left in the street with "people standing off to the side, trying to see what happened" (p. 29).

In her renowned work *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander argues that in American society today, a system comparable to racial segregation has come to birth (Alexander, p. 15). Through the war on drugs and mass incarceration, colored people are commodified, deprived of upward mobility, and perpetually trapped in a cycle of poverty. Most people view the waging of the War on Drugs as a well-intentioned effort by the government to address the rampant drug crime in impoverished minority-populated neighborhoods. Alexander believes this view is completely wrong.

Most notably, the 1984 Comprehensive Crime Control and Safe Streets Act eliminated federal requirements for parole, which directly contributed to the proliferation of older prisoners. Subsequently, the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act established mandatory minimum sentencing schemes, creating disproportionate drug sentencing provisions: crack and powder cocaine sentences based on a 100-to-1 ratio. Crack cocaine, which produces a more intense pleasure in smaller amounts, is more cost-effective and therefore are more popular among impoverished black communities, while powder cocaine is more prevalent in white communities. This creates huge racial disparities in the measurement of penalty. The 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act's expansion in 1988 added an overly broad definition of conspiracy. As a result, the number of colored people who could be convicted of crimes, whether serious or not, skyrocketed. In addition, it authorized public housing authorities to evict any tenant who participated in drug-related criminal activities in or near public houses, and eliminated many federal benefits, including student loans for those convicted of drug crimes. Furthermore, after colored people who are once included in the mass incarceration system are released from prison, exclusion still awaits them, and they become part of a new underclass in America that is rife with legalized discrimination and stigma.

The development of this new type of Jim Crow for colored people in American society did not happen overnight, but rather developed over time and escalated until it eventually became one of the systemic manifestations of biopower. To begin with, President Richard Nixon declared a "war on drugs" and instituted new policies such as mandatory minimum sentencing. Shockingly high sentences for drug offenses—10, 20, 30 years or even life in prison—were commonplace. President Ronald Reagan

upgraded these efforts by pouring more money into crime fighting and deliberately inflaming public attention to crack cocaine, so as to publicize the dangers of black people. President Bill Clinton followed through on his "tough on crime" mantra and continued to intensify his efforts to crack down on black drug offenders. The election of Barack Obama, the first black president in U.S. history, didn't make a difference either, as he further increased federal spending on the war on drugs. All of this has resulted in broken families and disorganized communities filled with trauma.

Take a broader look at the policies of American presidents toward colored people, and it becomes clear that they present the same projection of national security into the realm of individual liberty for the sake of urgence and exception, which forms the basis of the contemporary war on drugs. The object of sovereign power cannot be created without the exclusion of the common enemy of all citizens. It is through the exclusion of these "risk factors" that the security state can always exist.

In Garden Heights, most blacks are still excluded from economic affluence, due to the continued pauperization, exploitation, and racial segregation. The authorities justified racial discrimination against all African Americans on the grounds of social security. In *The Hate U Give*, the dominant white community and the police officer who killed Khalil rationalize police brutality by making a big deal out of Khalil's status as a drug dealer to stigmatize him. But the truth is that Khalil's mother was a drug addict and owed a lot of money to the gangs, while his grandmother had cancer and desperately needed money for treatment. He had no choice but to go into drug dealing, which is the only way to make a lot of money in the black community. Even so, he never joined the gangs. Starr is then guilt-ridden that she ever doubted Khalil's motives and character. Her father's words wake her up. First and foremost, so many people in Garden Height became drug dealers because "corporate America don't bring jobs to our communities, and so many of the schools in our neighborhoods don't prepare us well enough" (p. 168). Besides, drug trafficking is a multibillion-dollar industry and black communities are awash in drugs, but no one is getting rich from it. Drugs come from somewhere, and they're destroying black community. Starr's father Maverick showed her the operating logic behind America's racial economy.

> "You got folks like Brenda, who think they need them to survive, and then you got the Khalils, who think they need to sell them to survive. The Brendas can't get jobs unless they're clean, and they can't pay for rehab unless they got jobs. When the Khalils get arrested for selling drugs, they either spend most of their life in prison, another billion-dollar industry, or they have a hard time getting a real job and probably start selling drugs again. That's the hate they're giving us, baby, a system designed against us. That's Thug Life" (pp. 168-169).

For the authority of the sovereign, in addition to having a rational excuse—maintaining social security to divert domestic conflicts, launching the War on Drugs against people of color is undoubtedly a tool for massive enrichment. The oppression of free labor is at the heart of slavery, and it plays an equally

important role in driving the expansion of drug war. Emulating slavery's exploitation and oppression of free labor, today's government authorities have introduced a provision to make a profit: prison labor. As a result, African American bodies, an indispensable resource stock in the United States racial economy, are commodified in exchange for a steady stream of interests.

In the biopolitical economy, "life is appropriated, divided up, and asymmetrically distributed," and "proper life" is consequently distinguished from "improper life" (Bird, p. 99). Poor blacks in *Concrete Rose*, as the "improper", are also dominated and exploited with the normative rationale which is preserved by the mechanisms of biopolitics. The novel's 17-year-old protagonist, Maverick, struggles to make a living with his family. He discovers that work hard to earn "clean money", which means to listen to his mother and not get involved in street gangs and drug dealing, can barely keep the family afloat. For example, with a high school diploma, Ma has to work two jobs to pay her rent and utility bills. The family's financial situation worsened after Maverick has a child of his own. Extra expenses such as diapers, formula, and baby furniture overwhelmed the mother and son. Under these circumstances, drug dealing seems to be Maverick's only option. Maverick noticed the economic oppression of racialized biopower,

> "Here I am, tryna make money to keep my momma's lights on. Meanwhile, some rich brat might hit me up tomorrow, offering to spend a couple hundred for an "experience." He never think what that money mean to somebody like me. Then who gotta watch out for the cops? Not him. I'm the one who gotta glance over my shoulder 24-7" (p. 227).

In the impoverished community of Maverick, hardworking and kind-hearted people like Ma still cannot make ends meet and improve her families' living condition. And for the young adolescents in Garden Heights, dealing drugs and joining gangs seems to be the only way to make enough money to cover the family's expenses, even if it puts them in jail or even takes their lives. And the novel also reveals that if a family loses their members because of incarceration, the situation would become worse, just like the absence of Maverick's father, a former local gang leader who was put in jail, exacerbates his family's economic conditions. Thus, through Maverick and his families' struggle to make a living, *Concrete Rose* illustrates how biopower creates a poverty cycle that is difficult to escape. With the commodification of black bodies and the deception of racial uplift in black communities, vulnerable groups fall victims to the operation of biopower because of their marginal and dominated position (Li & Li, p. 28).

2.3 Inflammatory Discourse in Mass Media and Education against Blacks

In an effort to build national momentum for the War on Drugs, and thus successfully deflect domestic conflicts, the sovereign authorities have continued to use inflammatory ideological discourse to exaggerate the dangers of crack cocaine and people of color. Crack had not yet entered the media's consciousness when President Reagan officially declared the War on Drugs in 1982. A few years after that, crack began to spread rapidly in poor black neighborhoods in Los Angeles and then in cities across

the country (Reinarman & Levine, p. 152). In 1985, the Reagan administration publicized the emergence of crack cocaine and intentionally led the public to believe that it was a crisis in poor black neighborhoods. At the same time, the media was saturated with images of black "crack whores", "crack dealers", and "crack babies"—images that invariably reinforced racial prejudice and hostility toward poor Blacks.

Michel Foucault adopted the term "discourse" to denote "a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning" (Foucault, 1991; Rabinow, 1991). Neither focusing on those who wield power nor analyzing the specific operational frameworks behind power, he reaches the understanding that power is omnipresent. In other word, power is everywhere. Power is diffused and manifested in the realms of discourse, knowledge, education, and so on. These discourses are often politically and ideologically charged.

Some of the episodes in *The Hate U Give* makes it clear that "discourses are produced by effects of power within a social order" (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 135), which prescribes particular rules and categories. Discourses are conducive to power and the rules and categories it prescribes. The protagonist Starr mentioned the media reaction after the shooting:

> On the Monday night news, they finally gave Khalil's name in the story about the shooting, but with a title added to it - Khalil Harris, a Suspected Drug Dealer. They didn't mention that he was unarmed. They said that an "unidentified witness" had been questioned and that the police were still investigating (p. 106).

There is no doubt that this media coverage contains a strong ideological discourse, which deliberately directs the audience to focus on the dishonorable identity of the victims, so as to ignore the tragic treatment of the racial injustice suffered by them. In other words, the media is deliberately portraying Khalil as a common enemy to the public who endangers the security of American society. This echoes Achille Mbembe's concepts that for the sovereign, in order to shoot down enemies and expel foreigners, "this attitude demands that such acts of death and banishment succeed in erasing—during the enemy's life, his death, and his relegation—what, in his face, belonged to his humanity" (Mbembe, p. 65). In contemporary democracies rife with hostility towards enemies, the execution of an ostracized person presupposes two steps: disfigurement and erasure. After being dehumanized and erased from one's individual identity, these culpable faces make society feel at ease to continue ever-increasing measures of segregation and discrimination, and a relation without desire is created between people, that is to say, since he or she is not one of us, what happens to him or her has nothing to do with us. Therefore, explaining and understanding, knowledge and recognition, are no longer essential. Never have hospitality and hostility been so directly opposed.

Bri also encountered inflammatory media rhetoric that stereotyped her race and identity. On one occasion, even after Bri safely passed through security, the school security guards insisted on searching Bri's book bag, which was undoubtedly a racial profiling. Brie was violently enforced for refusing to

let the school security guards search her backpack. The real reason she did not cooperate with the security guards was that she was selling candy against school rules, but because of Bri's skin color and race, there were rumors that Brie was actually selling drugs. This rumor spread quickly due to the racial tensions at Midtown School of the Arts. Many of Bri's classmates, most of whom were white, believed the rumor. White parents also trusted the rumor, and they expressed concern about black students attending Midtown School of the Arts. They held that black students were not only taking up grant seats, but could bring drugs and violence to the white community by leading astray their white children. Later, the security guards Long and Tate who had attacked Bri returned to the school at the request of the white parents, this immediately ignited a collective fire among all the black and brown kids. These kids then attacked the guards and chanted Bri's song that was written to counter stereotypes about black people. When it comes to the TV report, it mentions Bri's song and plays snippets of it, but deliberately cuts out the most violent part of the lyrics to portray her as an "angry black girl". The newscaster said that "the lyrics seemed to have encouraged students to violently take matters into their own hands" (p. 240). Brie begins to realize that the media's deliberate propaganda has contributed to the public's simplistic definition of her based on her family, race, and community, rather than truly seeing her as a multifaceted person. They make assumptions about her according to her skin color and race, erase her unique personal identity, and dehumanize her by applying negative stereotypes of African Americans.

Even in the classroom, ideological discourse is not absent. American children who lack the ability to judge right and wrong are taught implicit ideas of racial discrimination and inequality from an early age, making the idea of racial profiling so pervasive. Bri was often described by teachers as "aggressive" except Mrs. Murray, who happened to be Bri's only black teacher. "Aggressive" is a word that is supposed to mean threatening, but Bri had never threatened anybody, she just had her own thoughts about race in class. For instance, her history class never talked about black people before slavery even during Black History Month. Bri raises this question in class, however, her teacher's answer is "I will not tolerate outbursts in class" (p. 70).

What Mbembe calls nanocracialism is also necessary to erase the black person's personal identity and thus make it a more appropriate imaginary enemy, which is also revealed in education system.

> "Yet, in the end, what is nanoracism, if not that narcotic brand of prejudice based on skin color that gets expressed in seemingly anodyne everyday gestures, often apropos of nothing, apparently unconscious remarks, a little banter, some allusion or insinuation, a slip of the tongue, a joke, an innuendo, but also, it must be added, consciously spiteful remarks, like a malicious intention, a deliberate stamping underfoot or tackle, a dark desire to stigmatize and, in particular, to inflict violence, to injure and humiliate, to sully those not considered to be one of us?" (*Necropolitics*, p. 58)

Maverick and his dark-skinned classmates in *Concrete Rose* suffered the intangible attacks on dignity, self-esteem at school. These attacks are mostly invisible and their scars difficult to heal. First of all,

Maverick's school Garden High is really named Jefferson Davis High School, it is the only high school in this neighborhood. The common sense is that Jefferson Davis was a slave owner and the president of the Confederate states. Students in Garden Heights are mostly Black, and Maverick said that "whoever named the school after him did it as a middle finger to all of us, like they calling us slaves" (p. 78). Secondly, the history class in this school always involved white people's glory, hero and success, without any mention of the black people's history. The teacher talked about American history not from an objective and neutral standpoint, but from the perspective of white mainstream authorities on major historical events. He used such description as "how Columbus discovered America", which was met with Maverick's riposte, "how the hell can you 'discover' a place where people already lived?" (p. 83)

For Foucault, discourse can mask "its construction and capacity to produce knowledge and meaning". Moreover, the rules of discourse also imply the intentions of the speaker, fixing the meaning of the utterance or text and reinforcing its role through reiteration in society, so that it contributes to the political rationality and promotes production (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 126-134). Yet at the same time, the discourse hides both its capacity to fix meaning and its political intentions.

3. Conclusion

As a contemporary African American author and activist, Angie Thomas presciently discussed themes such as police brutality, systemic racism, and the racial economy of the United States in her works, calling attention to the everyday violence and injustice that African Americans suffer. Her literary creation accentuates the biopolitical predicaments of race faced by African American groups, and explores how biopower places blacks in an inclusive exclusion by "keeping away what disturbs, for containing or rejecting all excess, whether it is human, organic matter or industrial waste" (Mbembe, p. 60). In the operation of state racism in biopolitics, the African American young adults in Angie Thomas's three frictions, namely, *The Hate U Give* (2017), *On the Come Up* (2019) and *Concrete Rose* (2021), can easily fall victims to police brutality since they are considered to be potential threats that endanger the security of American society. In this way, the state of exception is not only the result of creating a certain designated space such as a concentration camp, but can also act directly on a certain body. Furthermore, their bodies are commodified under the operation of mass incarceration and the war on drugs, and are ultimately reduced to exploitable resources for the American racial economy. In order to erase the black person's personal identity and thus make it a more appropriate imaginary enemy, African Americans also encounter inflammatory discourse in the mass media and education that stereotypes their race and identity.

However, the author Angie Thomas is not completely pessimistic about the living situation of the American black group, and she actively explores the possibilities of the resistance against biopower. In *The Hate U Give*, after realizing that she can't be silent, the protagonist Starr actively participates in social activities, bravely speaks out for African Americans, so as to call for the public's attention to the

real situation of black people. Thomas explained her mission to humanize and normalize Black masculinity with *Concrete Rose*. The protagonist Maverick, eventually recognize his vulnerability with an appeal for relation of care, shining a light on humanity. Bri, the main character in *On the Come Up*, also breaks away from the labels that society places on African Americans, rejects the rules of the white business world, and listens to her inner voice to pursue her dreams.

Through writing about biopolitical predicaments and people's resistance, Angie Thomas denounces the violence of racial oppression and its pervasive effects, reminding people of the insidious racist injuries and historical atrocity. The harsh reality revealed by Thomas in her three novels calls attention to marginalized and precarious lives in America—African Americans, which echoes the gist of the Black Lives Matter Movement and has a realistic reference to today's American society.

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