

The Hate U Give: Police brutality in America and its consequences

By Nick Barrickman
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The Hate U Give—directed by George Tillman, Jr., written by Audrey Wells and based on the 2017 novel of the same title by Angie Thomas—addresses itself to the phenomenon of police brutality and its effect on a young, African-American working class girl and her family.

It is of some significance that a film dealing directly with police violence and issues of social class has been widely released and viewed. Undoubtedly, the interest in such social questions reflects deeper processes occurring in the population. While watching the film, this reviewer noted that the audience was comprised largely of teenagers and young adults.

The film (whose title is drawn from a lyric by rapper Tupac Shakur: “The Hate U Give Little Infants F---s Everybody” – T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E.) begins with a flashback depicting a much younger Starr Carter and her siblings receiving “The Talk” from her father, Maverick (Russell Hornsby), a former drug dealer who has since chosen the straight and narrow. They are told, in the event they are pulled over by a police officer, to always keep their hands clearly visible and not to move, because “moving makes police nervous.”

Years later, Starr (Amandla Stenberg) essentially lives two lives. On one hand, she resides in Garden Heights, a fictional lower-income, predominantly African-American neighborhood. There she and her siblings cope with the daily pressures of that life—including poverty and run-ins with gang members and the police, the latter often harassing residents without cause. Starr refers to the local high school as a place where you go to get “high, jumped or kidnapped.”

On the other hand, Starr attends Williamson, a predominantly white prep school located outside of her district where she is conscious to moderate her use of

slang and other “hood” mannerisms around her white friends, fearing the latter might be put off by any “confrontational” gestures on her part. In a monologue, Starr states this constant “code switching” causes her to loathe herself.

Starr’s conflicted social balancing act is brought to a head when she witnesses the brutal police murder of her childhood friend, Khalil (Algee Smith). Scared to speak about the event to her school friends out of fear they will not understand, Starr is increasingly angered by the seeming obliviousness and insensitivity of her peers. Meanwhile, problems of a deadlier variety develop in Garden Heights: local drug dealers want to prevent Starr from speaking to authorities about Khalil’s murder, fearing potential blowback due to the youth’s associations with them.

Eventually, the authorities’ failure to indict the guilty officer leads Starr to turn to political activism; culminating in a speech given at an anti-police rally and, rather implausibly, saving her community from the drug dealers that menace her.

The Hate U Give deals with numerous important social and political questions in contradictory, and ultimately unsatisfying, ways. Tillman, who before *The Hate U Give*, dabbled mostly in light comedy and family dramas focusing on the African-American middle class, shows sensitivity in his new film to more profound concerns. There are genuine insights here. Unfortunately, he also seems out of his depth in this new material, merely touching on issues and then forgetting about them, or resorting to clichéd, formulaic and even retrograde treatment of complicated questions.

The film’s portrayal of the brutal and racist police killing of Starr’s friend is done effectively—one gets a sense of the immense wound such an event leaves on

the lives of family and friends, on an entire community. Smith's Khalil is not merely another "statistic," but an individual who lived, loved and was cared for by others. His death is a crime and a loss.

Likewise, the filmmakers and lead actress Stenberg (*Hunger Games*) deal sensitively with Starr's difficulties following the killing. She gradually overcomes her fears of "rocking the boat" and begins to speak out in defense of her murdered friend, whose character (as an inner city "thug") is being besmirched by the news media.

When it comes to presenting the more overtly political issues, the filmmakers, unfortunately, fall back on the framework of racial identity. The contradiction between Starr's lower-income, predominantly black neighborhood, on the one hand, and the private school she attends, as well as the white, oblivious students the protagonist must interact with, on the other, is presented largely as one of race. Clearly, however, income, the life experiences of the students, the media bombardment and other questions are central in this regard.

The one exception to these rather one-dimensional portrayals, to the film's credit, is the protagonist's relationship with her white boyfriend, Chris (KJ Apa), who pushes back against Starr's confused attempts to define their relationship along racial lines (he says: "black, white—no one gives a shit").

(Tellingly, the race and identity politics-obsessed *New York Times* emphatically denounces Apa's character, with film reviewer Aisha Harris referring to the scene as a "troublesome recitation of the tired axiom 'I don't see color.'")

Other one-dimensional qualities persist in the film. Hornsby's role as Maverick, Starr's ex-gang member, black nationalist father, is essentially another edition of the "strong black male lead" figure who harps relentlessly on his children about the principles of the Black Panthers' Ten-Point Program, and confronts drug dealers on his porch.

More problematic is the film's resolution of its central conflicts. After being presented with questions of poverty, racism, injustice and police brutality, the filmmakers resolve these conflicts by going after the lowest-hanging fruit, with Starr's family, the neighborhood and the police (!) "coming together"—to see that gang leader King, played menacingly by

Anthony Mackie, is locked up for a long, long time. At best, this is avoiding the issues, and at worst, an argument for empowering the police and promoting illusions in "the system" to reform itself. The dead-ended character of such appeals manifests itself in the intense poverty and social misery seen throughout the film.

One hopes that these issues will be dealt with in a more serious and probing way by filmmakers as they increasingly take on a burning significance for great numbers of people.

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