

Intersections of American Identity: Challenging Assumptions About Gender, Race, Class, and Nationality in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Hate U Give*

The way we frame activism and consequently define it depends on a number of variables. When activists speak out against injustices, their safety and how their message is received depends on how they are perceived as individuals. This perception, for some, can leave young people facing a number of dilemmas about who they are as a person. For example, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1964) was often celebrated for its subtle interrogation of Southern values in a way that was socially acceptable for the time. Six-year-old Scout, the protagonist, serves as both narrator and spectator of Tom Robinson's story after he is unjustly accused of raping Mayella Ewell. Scout's roles, however, stifle the novel's ability to challenge the social and political matters that it highlights. While Lee's exploration of these complex issues continues to be valuable, the work lacks the ability to encourage empathy for silenced, marginalized people. More contemporary novels such as Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017), on the other hand, challenges rigid ideas about what it means to be an American by acknowledging the complexity of the issues that young people of color must face as integral elements of their identity formation. This novel's protagonist, Starr Carter, must make sense of being a young Black girl who lives in the inner city but goes to school in an upscale neighborhood after her best friend is shot by a policeman right in front of her. Starr struggles to make sense of the intersections of her identity while also trying to find the voice to speak for her friend. *The Hate U Give*, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, offers a model of activism in a hostile political climate. However, there is a different, more hostile response to Starr's speaking up than there is to Scout's. By juxtaposing two key scenes, I will reveal the unchecked assumptions about activists and activism in the two

novels. This research underscores the paradigmatic shift in conversations about speaking against social injustices which reflects conversations about movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement which began in 2013. Ultimately, I am arguing that *To Kill a Mockingbird* joins a discussion and presents a perspective sufficient for its time, but in order for contemporary youth to be able to challenge assumptions about gender, race, class, and nationality in their own time, novels like *The Hate U Give* are more critically effective.