

Activism and Empathy  
ChLA 2019

(Pro) Testing the Message: Youth Activism and the Media

Angie Thomas' YA novel The Hate U Give (2017) narrates the birth of an activist in 16-year-old Starr Carter. Starr, who witnesses her unarmed friend's murder by a police officer, is called to protest police brutality and stand in solidarity with her community. She promises to "never be quiet" in the face of injustice. Thomas' message to adolescents is clear: stand up tall, grab a megaphone and speak out against racism and oppression. This message about youth activism is further amplified through adjacent media such as the novel's online discussion guide which asks youth, "after reading the book, how can you use your voice to promote and advance social justice?" (available through Thomas' author website: [https://www.scribd.com/document/336105576/Hate-U-Give-Discussion-Guide#from\\_embed](https://www.scribd.com/document/336105576/Hate-U-Give-Discussion-Guide#from_embed)) In one high-profile answer to this question, Amandla Stenberg, the popular 19-year-old star of the film version of The Hate U Give (opening October 2018), uses her Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter accounts to support Time's Up and Black Lives Matter, among other movements and social causes.

This layering of social media platforms, digital educational materials and YA literature impels a consistent and powerful message that youth and activism belong together, and that young people can be valuable players in the fight for social justice. Given that all social and political movements and organizations need youth energy, savvy, and networks to survive and grow, it is not surprising that they court young people's participation. The impetus to involve adolescents in their movement is as true for the NRLC (National Right to Life Committee) or Susan B. Anthony List (an anti-abortion organization that works to elect "pro-life" politicians) as it is for Planned Parenthood or NARAL Pro-Choice America (the acronym has had three different iterations since its founding in 1969). Indeed, on the respective websites of these organizations, teens are targeted as potential activists in the fight for reproductive rights or for the repeal of abortion legislation.

In this paper I am interested in interrogating how progressive and conservative organizations alike construct the youth activist through digital media such as websites and Twitter. My interest in youth activism stems from my ongoing investigation into the figure of the fetus, its "rights," and its ontological, political and cultural meanings. I am interested in the convergence of these two political subjects: the "underage" and powerfully silent fetus and the "vocal" youth activist who may "come of age" when speaking on either side of the right to life/reproductive rights divide. Through an examination of youth programming, rhetoric, and imagery of well-funded, prominent "pro-life" and "pro-choice" organizations, I argue that these organizations construct youth activism in their own image. These constructions may be echoed, resisted or complicated through youth-initiated media outlets such as Twitter. In addition to bringing an awareness to the politicization of youth (especially girls) through their

framing as activists, in this paper I stretch the limits of my empathy, and perhaps that of the audience, in owning my discomfort in recognizing and acknowledging the complex and constructed nature of a youth activism that challenges my political and ideological commitments.