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Respectability Under Surveillance: How On the Come Up Stages Black Girlhood Between Racialized School Discipline and Hip-Hop Authenticity

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ABSTRACT: This research analyzes Angie Thomas's On the Come Up as a hip-hop-focused portrayal of Black girlhood influenced by racialized school discipline, respectability politics, and the commercial pressures of rap authenticity. Through Critical Race Theory, the research utilizes five core components: ordinary racism, interest convergence, the social construction along with differential racialization of race, voice of color and counter narratives, and intersectionality, through the qualitative interpretive textual analysis of "Bri," Brianna Jackson's experiences in school, her family life, and the local hip-hop scene. The analysis revels that Bri's potryal as a potential thread expresses normalized racial monitoring, while institutional and commercial reactions to her talent indicate the Black expression is esteemed when construct cultural or economic gain for dominant groups, Bri is perceived as dangerous in school, seen as authentic when her anger is commercially beneficial, and deemed unacceptable when she exceeds gendered norms of respectable Black girlhood, with her rap serving as a counter narrative that challenges prevailing stories dictated by schools, media, and the music industry. The research claims that On the Come Up depicts hip hop as a venue for racial commodification and a counter-hegemonic act through which Bri challenges the oversight of her body, voice, and dreams, enhancing CRT-based literary criticism and Hip Hop studies by illustrating how modern young adult fiction reflects the connection between Black girlhood, institutional authority, and hip-hop authenticity.

KEYWORDS: Black girlhood, hip-hop authenticity, respectability politics, Intersectionality, Interest convergence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Critical Race Theory (CRT) explores the functioning of race and racism within legal, educational, cultural, and social systems, treating racism not as an isolated incident but as a systematic and routine aspect of societal existence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Landson-Billings,1998). The main issues it addresses- the normalization of racism, the social creation of race, interest convergence, the importance of marginalized perspectives, and intersectionality are particularly significant to depictions of Black youth, whose bodies and cultural practices are often interpreted through racialized perceptions of danger, criminality, poverty, and disorder (Eissa, 2025). Angie Thomas's On the Come Up serves as an important literary space for exploring these themes. The story centers on sixteen-year-old Brianna Jackson, known as 'Bri', a hopeful rapper from Garden Heights. She seeks to break into the professional hip hop world while facing challenges such as poverty, racial profiling, school discipline, family issues, and public misrepresentation. Thomas highlights that Bri is categorized as a "hoodlum" at school and subsequently becomes a central point of debate when her song gains popularity, with the media depicting her as more of a threat than a musical artist (Thomas, 2019). Bri's aspiration in music is therefore intertwined with the societal interpretations linked to her body, community, gender, and Black identity (Eissa, 2025).

The main conflict of the novel arises when Bri is approached and searched by security guards at her predominantly White school, which reveals how Black girls can be perceived as questionable in educational settings. The event inspires Bri to create and present a rap that channels her frustration into a public outlet; however, this outlet results in new types of surveillance, as school officials, families, media, and industry representatives evaluate her performance based on conflicting criteria of respectability and hip hop authenticity (Payne,2020). Hip hop offers Black girls a means of expressing critique, pleasure, anger, and self-identification; however, it can also reproduce misogyny, hypermasculinity, and restrictive notions of authenticity (Payne, 2020). Black girls thus encounter a dual challenge, needing to be respectable enough to avoid racist stereotypes while also embodying a commercially recognizable form of "real" Blackness in hip hop termed by Payne(2020) as the "Cardi B -Beyoncé complex".

This study examines how On the Come Up portrays Black girlhood as navigating the challenges of racialized school discipline and the authenticity pressures of hip hop culture. It contends that Thomas presents authenticity not as a voluntarily selected

characteristic but as a racialized and gendered act influenced by oversight and institutional authority. Bri faces the pressure to gain respectability that meets the standards of educational and family institutions, while also being "authentic" enough to meet the commercial demands of the hip-hop industry. Her struggle shows that the pressure to be real can transform into another way that Black youth are classified, commercialized, and regulated (Eissa, 2025).

The research provides three key contributions. Initially, it broadens CRT-focused analyses of young adult literature by linking racialized school discipline to hip hop culture. Secondly, it positions respectability politics at the core of the novel's depiction of Black girlhood. Third, it adds to Hip Hop studies by interpreting Bri's rap not just as a literary embellishment but as a cultural activity through which she creates knowledge, challenges prevailing narratives, and highlights institutional contradictions (Payne, 2020; Eissa,2025).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This analysis integrates academic research from four areas: Critical Race Theory, Black girlhood and respectability Politics, racialized school discipline, and hip hop authenticity to create a theoretical basis for the subsequent examination.

A. Critical Race Theory: Core Tenets and Educational Application

CRT developed from legal studies in the late 1980s as a reaction to the halted advancement of civil rights reforms and the ongoing presence of systemic racism (Bell, 1995; Delgado7 Stefancic, 2017). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) highlights common assertions acknowledge by numerous CRT scholars, racism is typical rather than exceptional Interst convergence (material determinism) influences the timing of racial advancement, race is a social construct, race is intersectional and it against essentialism and *voice of color* principle underscores the knowledge gained from marginalized experiences typically conveyed through counter storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic,2017; Ladson Billings,1998). These principles are validated in comprehensive summaries of the discipline, which assert that CRT views racism as ingrained in everyday institutional activities rather than merely as individual bias (Nowicki, 2024; Duignan, 2024). In education, Ladson Billings (1988) claims that CRT should address the connection between structural inequality and the knowledge generated by marginalized groups. CRT in education analyzes how school policies and disciplinary practices reproduce racial hierarchy even when presented as impartial (Hines Datiri& Carter Andrews, 2020; Kemp Graham, 2018), and Crenshaw et al. (2015) demonstrate that zero tolerance policies and subjective behavioral violations unfairly target students of color, especially Black girls.

Research on Angie Thomas's works has often focused on racism, gender biases, and discrimination using CRT and similar theoretical perspectives. Arikah (2020) utilizes Delgado and Stefancic's CRT frameworks to highlight everyday racism, material determination, social construction, differential racialization, intersectionality, and the voice of color in *On the Come Up*, illustrating characters' resilience through activism and lived experiences. Alfando and Wahyuni (2022) utilize intersectionality theory to explore the dual oppression faced by Black women in the novel, resulting from the intertwining impacts of racism and patriarchal beliefs, while Badriyah (2021) investigates how the novel's main character reacts to bias and discrimination within school, family, and community contexts. These research efforts highlight the significance of the novel as a piece of critique regarding race and gender, yet the connection between school monitoring and hip hop authenticity is still insufficiently explored.

B. Black Girlhood, Respectability Politics, and Intersectionality

Respectability politics denotes the expectations imposed on marginalized groups to conform to prevailing norms of conduct, look, and communication to challenge racist stereotypes (Higginbotham,1993). It can act as a survival tactic, but it also shifts the responsibility for racial justice to those who face oppression. Black feminist scholars argue that Black women find themselves in a space defined by conflicting controlling images that are depicted as excessive, aggressive, or threatening, while also being expected to exhibit remarkable restraint and respectability (Collins, 2000). Latimer et al. (2024) illustrate how family socialization strengthens controlling stereotypes like the Jezebel, Welfare Queen, Angry Black Woman, and Hoodrat, Ratchet Chick that young Black women navigate while forming their self-identities.

Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), illustrates how race, gender, class, and various power dimensions mutually shape each other; Alfando and Wahyuni (2022) utilize this perspective to demonstrate how racism and patriarchal beliefs intertwine to create a dual oppression for Black women and girls. Within hip hop culture, these contradictions are particularly evident; research on "ratcht respectability" indicates that Black teenage girls engage in stigmatized performances as a form of empowerment, yet they continue to encounter moral judgment (Payne, 2020). Payne's (2020) notion of the "Cardi B-Beyoncé complex" illustrates the way Black girls balance respectability and ratchetness, utilizing hip hop imagery to build dual identities, while Payne (2024) further demonstrates that involvement in Hip Hop aids in the gendered racial identity formation of Black adolescent girls, empowering them to confront racism, sexism, and social pressures. Hip hop can serve as both a constraining force and a source of empowerment; it can reinforce misogynistic and hypermasculine representations while also empowering Black girls to confront silence and express experiences omitted from respectable public discourse (Durham et al., 2013; Ling et al., 2025).

C. Racialized School Discipline and the Criminalization of Black Girls

Schools are not racially impartial environments; studies indicate they often perceive Black students as older, more threatening, and more accountable for disruptions compared to white counterparts (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Hines Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). School security measures frequently interpret typical teenage actions as signs of criminal behavior, a process that is particularly impactful for Black girls. Kemp-Graham (2018) records that African American girls experience the highest suspension rates compared to any group and are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary disciplinary measures. Crenshaw et al. (2015) assert that girls of color experience stricter discipline compared to their White counterparts and are mostly left out of initiatives aimed at tackling the school-to-prison pipeline. Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) apply critical race feminism to analyze the disproportionate impact of zero tolerance policies on Black girls. Morris and Perry (2017) discover that Black girls are three times as likely as White girls to get office referrals, especially for subjective infractions like disruptive behavior, dress code breaches, and disobedience influenced by gendered perceptions that punish Black girls for perceived deviations from traditional femininity. In a qualitative investigation of a physical confrontation between Black girls at an urban school, Farinde Wu, Butler, and Allen Handy (2022) demonstrate that hyper-criminalization and harsh disciplinary measures impaired the girls' academic experiences, revealing that their behavior stemmed from necessity and self-defense rather than form deviate tendencies. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO,2024) verifies these inequities, indicating that Black girls made up 45% of out-of-school suspensions, 37% of in-school suspensions, and 43% of expulsions during the 2017-18 school year, although they represented merely 15% of female students (Nowicki, 2024)

D. Hip Hop Authenticity, Commercialization, and Black Women's Rap

Authenticity holds significant importance in hip hop; artists are anticipated to showcase credibility through language, background, locality, and their ties to the community, yet authenticity is constructed, assessed, and marketed through cultural institutions and commerce instead of being generated independently of power. Sajnani (2018) explores the concept's initial meaning as a call for liberation grounded in Black political and cultural resistance, while also addressing critiques of authenticity as a commercial exploitation of ghetto culture. Watkins (2005) examines the influence of commercial interests on hip hop's cultural output and critiques the commodification of authenticity as a tool of racial capitalism. Research on Black women rappers explores their navigation of self-expression, visibility in commerce, sexuality, class, and respectability, indicating that media industries might honor racialized performances while limiting the interpretations accessible to Black women (Payne, 2020). Cabas Mijares and Balli (2025) demonstrate this trend in their examination of media portrayals of Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's WAP, highlighting how mainstream outlets reinterpreted the artists' bold expression of sexual pleasure as a moral issue instead of valid self-expression. Ling et al. (2025) broaden this conversation by examining the worldwide aspects of hip hop feminism, illustrating how female artists employ hip hop to confront gender stereotypes in various transnational settings.

E. Research Gap

Current research indicates that *On the Come Up* explores themes of racism, gender stereotypes, discrimination, poverty, and Black girlhood (Arikah,2020; Alfando & Wahyuni,2022; Eissa, 2025; Badriyah, 2021). Related research utilizes Duncombe's framework of cultural resistance in Bri's rap (Lusi et al., 2025) and explores the psychological effects of racial discrimination on the characters in the novel (Subathra &Selvam, 2023). However, little focus has been given to how the novel links racialized school discipline with the commercial creation of hip hop authenticity. This study fills that gap by employing five CRT components to examine Bri's transitions among school, family, and hip hop environments: (1) racism as ordinary and institutional, (2) interest convergence, (3) social construction and differential racialization, (4) voice of color and counter storytelling, and (5) Intersectionality. These components enable the research to analyze not just what occurs with Bri, but also how institutions create the significances linked to her body, voice, and music.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilizes qualitative interpretive textual analysis of Angie Thomas's On the Come Up (2019) as a cultural text that reflects racial power, Black girlhood, education, family dynamics, and hip hop culture. Following the five CRT dimensions mentioned earlier, the analysis explores the school security event, institutional reactions, family conversations, battle rap exhibitions, viral music distribution, studio discussions, and clashes between commercial goals and personal artistic identity. This contextual reading uncovers structural contradictions without framing Bri as emblematic of all black girls or hip hop musicians.

IV. FONT SIZES FOR PAPERS

This section combines the five CRT dimensions with textual evidence from the novel On the Come Up and relevant research to analyze how Bri's experiences highlight the relationship between racialized school discipline, respectability politics, and hip hop authenticity.

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A. *Racism as Ordinary: The Security Guard Incident*

Racism is ordinary, ingrained in everyday institutional practices rather than being limited to individual bias (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson Billings, 1998). At the beginning of the novel, Bri is approached and physically checked by the security guards at her mainly White school; the guards regard her with suspicion prior to listening to he account, transforming racial prejudices into physical control. Thomas depicts this as a standard reflection of the school's security rationale instead of an unusual misconception, evident in the remark, "Nobody wants to say it, but if you're black or brown, you're more likely to end up on their radar"(Thomas, 2019). The guards intensify their actions even without proof. "I try to yank and tug away, which only makes his grip tighter. Before I know it, my chest hits the ground first, then my face is pressed against the cold floor" (Thomas, 2019). Long's claim, "you brought something in here,huh?...You lil hoodlum!"(Thomas, 2019), illustrates how doubt evolves into the criminalization of physical dominance. Kemp Graham (2018) notes that Black girls have the highest suspension rates among all groups even before arriving security checkpoint placing bri's experience within a broder institutional trend instead of a solitary overreaction. Crenshaw et al. (2015) note that girls of color are often ecluded from public discussions about the school to prison pipeline, despite facing its repercussions firsthand, which clarifies why the guard's actions at Midtown go unchallenged. Hines Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) also observe that zero tolerance security approaches interpret ambiguous actions by Black girls as sings of thread instead of typical adolescence, a notion Thomas emphasizes by showcasing the guards' willingness to restrain Bri without first listening to the account. Being a Black girl, Bri is stripped of the cultural safeguarding linked to innocent girlhood her fear is interpreted as guilt and her anger as hostility (Morris & Perry, 2017). Farinde Wu et al. (2022) observe a similar trend in their investigation of Black girl's school discipline and noting that staff reinterpreted self protective responses to institutional aggression as unprovoked defiance.

B. Interest Convergence: Industry Recognition and Commercial Authenticity

Interest convergence posits that advancements in racial equality mainly take place when they coincide with prevailing interests (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). One Bri's rap gains popularity the music industry's interest becomes dependent: producers assess how her anger, poverty, and clashes with school officials can be transformed into marketable authenticity. While in recording session, Doc inquires, "What's the world done to you lately?" Bri replies, "It put my family in a messed up situation. It pinned me to the fround. It called me a hoodlum," to which Doc responds, "Let'em know how you feeling then (Thomas, 2019). A conversation illustrating the industry's transformation of trauma into artistic and financial worth. Bri Acknowledges this financial reasoning herself: "But if I did rap that way just to get a hit and make money, then good for me, considering all the bullshit my famuly's dealing with. Until you wake up in a cold house, then come at me, bruh" (Thomas,2019).

This illustrates CRT's c concept of interest convergence, where marginalized voices gain acknowledgment when they align with dominant interests (Delgado & Stefanicic.2017; Ladson Billings, 1998). Bell's (1995) intial argument suggested that racial advancement is often provided only when it is advantageous to the dominant group and the studio scene reflects this idea on a smaller scale: Bri's suffering is articulated to Doc exactly when it turns into something he can sell, in line with extensive research indicating that the Black experience is predominantly recognized when it can be commercialized (Sajanani, 2018; Payne, 2020).

C. Social Construction and Differential Racialization: Bri as Threat, Commodity, and Artist.

Race is a social construct, and groups are racialized in dynamic manners to uphold power (Degado & Stefancic, 2017; Duignan, 2024). Delgado and stefancic (2017) refer to this changing process as differential racialization, in which powerful institutions depict a minority group in a manner that aligns with their interests, illustrating how the same characteristics can render Bri as threatening in one context and appealing in another. Eissa (2025) elaborates on this by demonstrating that Bri navigates intersecting frameworks of racial, gender, and class oppression that attribute her varying worth based on the observing institution, ensuring that no solitary label fully encapsulated her status. Bri lacks a consistent public persona, at school, she is seen as a possible troublemaker, whereas in the music scene, that same perception is rebranded as authenticity. The traits that render her questionable at school are anger, background, straightforwardness, unwiliness to seen compliant convey authenticity in hip hop. Doc' reaction to her description of being branded a hoodlum illustrates how institutional harm is converted into sellable content and Bri deliberately challenges this assigned identity "They wanna call me a hoodlum? Fine, I'll be a goddamn hoodlum…You think I'm a thug, well I claim it…That's what you expect, bitch, ain't? The picture you painted, I frame it" (Thomas,2019). These excerpts demonstrate that hood, dangerous, real, and respectable are radicalized classifications rather than objective descriptions (Duignan,2024; Nowicki,2014). Bri is also racialized differently by gender, male rappers can express aggression as strength, while her aggression is more often interpreted as ethical weakness or societal threat (Collins, 2000; Payne, 2020).

D. Voice of Color and Counter Storytelling: Rap as Knowledge Production

The voice of color study highlights the knowledge gained from marginalized experiences conveyed through counter storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson Billings, 1998). Although school views Bri as a disciplinary issue and the media portrays her lived experience and reveals the disparity between her treatment and the behavior expected of her lived experience and reveals the

disparity between her treatment and the behavior expected of her. Her lyric "You think I'm a thug, well I claim it…. The picture you painted, I frame it"c(Thomas, 2019) that reinterprets enforced stereotypes into a counter narrative, and directly confronts school authority: "Pin me to the ground, boy, you fucked up. Wrote me off, called your squad, but you lucked up" (Thomas, 2019). Her rap serves not just as an emotional outlet but also as an analytic tool connecting school discipline, community stigma, and media portrayal. Ladson Billings (1998 contends that counter storytelling serves as contextual knowledge that contests the authoritative narratives created by institutions able to determine reality, and Bri's verses perform this function by substituting her perspective for the school's disciplinary narrative of the event.Durham wt al. (2013) contend that hip hop performance enables Black women and girls to theorize from lived experience, viewing artistic expression as a valid sorce of critical knowledge instead of just a form of catharsis. Bri emphasizes her artistic control "When I got on that mic, it was just me and the mic…. I just said what Bri the rapper wanted to say" (Thomas, 2019) that corresponding with study that interprets her rap as a platform for resistance and political consciousness (Lusi et al., 2025).This counter narrative function illustrates how hip hop acts as a cultural areana in which Black girls express experiences thath mainstream institutions overliik, generating knowledge beyond dominant epistemic frameworks (Durham et al., 2013; ladson Billings, 1998).

E. Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class, and Black Girlhood

Intersectionality asserts that race must be viewed in conjuction with gender, class, age, and other dimensions of power (Delgado & Stegancic, 2017). Crenshaw (1989) initially created the concept to demonstrate that Black wonmen's experiences of discrimination couldn't be simplified to race or gender alone, as antidiscrimination law treated each category separately and thus did not safeguard those positioned at their intersection. Colins (2000) elaborates on this idea with her notion of a matrix of domination, where race, gender, class, and age function as interconnected systems instead of separate categories a framework that aligns with how Bri's vulnerability simultaneously escalates across education, sector, and household. Bri's mother highlights the systemic aspect of this situation: "Sometimes the rules are different for black folks, baby…. Midtown is unfortunately one of those place where you not only gotta play chess, but you gotta play it by a different set of rules" (Thomas, 2019). Bri's observation reveals the gendered aspect of school discipline "No, but girls like you are the only ones getting hits on their permanent record!" (Thomas, 2019), as her age and limited power influence her experience: "It's like Jay doesn't trust me enough to tell me the important stuff…. I can handle more than she thinks" (Thomas, 2019). Her neighborhood is seen as proof of shared risk: "Let's be real. We're black kids from one of the worst neighborhoods in the city. All it takes is one of us messing up, and suddenly all of us messed up" (Thomas, 2019). Finanial stress links rap to familial survival, similar to her previous insight ablut rapping "to get a hit and make money" (Thomas, 2019). These circumstances complicate the language of personal choice: Bri's quest for rap is not purely rebellious not entirely entrepreneurial, but influenced by her family restricted options, alingning with Alfando and Wahyuni's (20220 intersectional analysis and Eissa's (2025) illustration of how the novel represents Collins's (2000) matrix of domination encompassing race, class, gender, and age.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed On the Come Up using five CRT core components: racism as ordinary, interest convergence, social construction and differential racialization, voice of color and counter storytelling, and intersectionality. The analysis indicates that the novel depicts Black girlhood as a state influenced by ongoing interpretation and observation. Bri's school experience shows that radicalized discipline functions through common institutional practices that view Black youth with suspicion, Interest convergence indicates that acknowledgment arises when her narrative supports institutional image or financial gain; the social construction of race clarifies how she is radicalized in various ways as troublemaker, threat, genuine rapper, and sellable asset, voice of color and counter storytelling highlight how her rap challenges the narratives placed upon her, and instersectionality shows that her experience results from the interconnected influences of race, gender, class, age, neighborhood, and family background. The research posits that On the Come Up presents respectability and authenticity as competing yet interrelated control systems, respectability compels Bri to manage her behavior, voice, and appearance to evade racial stereotypes, where as hip hop authenticity urges her to exhibit a recognizable racialized realness for cultural validation. Demand does not completely acknowledge her complexity, but the novel does not depict Bri as lacking power haer rap serves as a counter hegemonic act through which she makes sense of institutional violence, challenges racialied depiction, and manages the conditions of her own visibility. On the Come Up ultimately shows that the quest for authenticity is tied to the battle over racial significance, Bri's come up entails asserting her right to define herself in a society that consistently turns Black girls into issues, stereotypes, products, or symbols.

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