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The Intersectionality of Race, Class and Gender, and the Matrix of Domination in Angie Thomas's *On the Come Up* (2019)

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Abstract

This paper aims to study Angie Thomas's novel *On the Come Up* (2019) through the frameworks of intersectionality and the matrix of domination, focusing on how race, class, and gender intersect to shape the experiences of the protagonist, Brianna Jackson, and her family. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and Patricia Hill Collins's concept of the matrix of domination, the study explores how overlapping systems of oppression-racial stereotyping, economic hardship, and gender bias-manifest in the lives of Brianna, her mother Jay Jackson, and her Aunt Pooh. The analysis highlights how Brianna's identity as a Black, working-class, female teenager exposes her to unique forms of discrimination and marginalization, particularly in the context of her pursuit of a rap career. The novel is interpreted as a critique of societal structures that perpetuate stereotypes and limit opportunities for Black youth, especially young women. The paper also examines the characters' navigation of power structures, and Brianna's struggle for self-definition, and the role of family and community support in fostering empowerment and resistance. In the final analysis, the study will argue that *On the Come Up* not only illuminates the complexities of intersecting oppressions but also underscores the importance of self-authenticity and familial solidarity in challenging the matrix of domination

Keywords: Intersectional identity : matrix of domination; empowerment; authenticity ;self-definition

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Introduction

On the Come Up (2019) is Angie Thomas's second novel after her debut best-seller, *The Hate U Give* published in 2017. Similarly set in the fictional, predominantly, black neighbourhood of Garden Heights, *On the Come Up* foregrounds the intersection of race, class and gender in the lives of its characters, and in particular the main character, Brianna Jackson (Bri). According to Jean Ait Belkhir and Bernice McNair Barne, the concept of intersectionality suggests a "triangle of oppression" i.e., the paradigm of oppression of race, class and gender (RCG) as "a unified race-class-gender framework that would allow for addressing major questions of the modern age (164).

Utilizing Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and Patricia H. Collins's sociological paradigm of the matrix of domination, this paper examines *On the Come Up* can be deemed to successfully challenge dominant stereotypes about black people/ women . The novel's nuanced depiction of intersecting oppressions and acts of resistance reflects the principles of black feminist thought, championing both personal empowerment and collective change within oppressive social structures. It also offers a powerful critique the matrix of domination. Hence, the categories of race, class and gender are viewed as overlapping forms of systematic discrimination of the main character, Brianna, , her mother Jay Jackson , and Brianna's Aunt Pooh (Katricia Bordeaux). Furthermore, the themes of self-definition and the authenticity of character are examined as the route towards Brianna's empowerment, self-expression and success (Collins, *Black Feminist* 227).

The Concepts of Intersectionality and the Sociological Paradigm of the Matrix of Domination

In societies that prioritize profit over human needs, certain groups, like black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women are

sometimes marginalized, dehumanized and made to feel inferior through systemic oppression and differences are oversimplified into opposing categories such as dominant/subordinate or superior/inferior (Lorde15). Consequently, race, class, gender (RCG) studies shift the “center” from analysis rooted in the perspectives and experiences of dominant groups to understanding the lived experiences of those historically marginalized analysis that distorts these experiences”, and disclose its “theoretical limitations undermining the development of feminist and antiracist politics”(“Demarginalizing”139). Crenshaw asserts that intersectionality is not offered as a new totalizing theory of identity but rather as a provisional concept drawing a connection between politics and postmodern theory and suggesting a methodology to disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as “mutually exclusive categories” (“Demarginalizing” 139). In the same article, she offers the following definition of intersectionality:

Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking. (149)

As such, intersectionality is a theoretical tool that explains the manner in which individuals may experience overlapping forms of discrimination or disadvantage based on their “intersectional attributes” or multiple identities, such as “aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, and sexual orientation” (“Applying intersectionality”). Crenshaw also proposes representational intersectionality as one of a threefold definition of intersectionality. Representational intersectionality is the sexist and racist marginalization and objectification of women of color in representation (“Mapping the Margins” 1283). In an online interview entitled “ Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than

Two Decades Later” (2017), Crenshaw stresses that intersectionality is neither identity politics, nor is it about creating new hierarchies of oppression; rather, it is a framework for recognizing the unique experiences of those who exist at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities.

Both the concept of intersectionality and the sociological paradigm of the matrix of domination provide sociologists with analytical frameworks to study power dynamics and systems of oppression within society, which is also applicable to the study of literary texts. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), Patricia Hills Collins emphasizes the concept of intersectionality arguing that black women’s experience of oppression and marginalization is unique and different from that of white women or black men, a fact that is disregarded by mainstream feminist theory. Therefore, in theory and praxis, intersectionality is not only an analytical tool but also a political tool employed to disclose multiple forms of marginalization facing less powerful social groups who have to defy the interlocking systems or structures of power shaping their lives, linking theoretical and empirical knowledge production to activism (Dill and Zambrana 12).

Collins’s paradigm of the matrix of domination, related to the concept of intersectionality, refers to the way the different but intersecting levels of oppression and domination originate from the societal configuration of race, class, gender and nation relations. According to Andersen and Collins, the socially constructed categories of race, class, and gender do not operate alone, but within a system of simultaneous, interrelated social relationships— or a matrix of domination illuminating their close connectedness to various power structures (51, 53). These divisions are deeply embedded in the structure of social institutions i.e., power structures, such as the structural domain which includes work, family, education, the

media; the disciplinary domain which includes the state and the legal system; the hegemonic domain which includes the cultural ideologies and beliefs that justify oppression; and the interpersonal domain which relates to everyday interactions and personal experiences. The matrix thinking has several important implications which exclude the “add and stir” approach, often used to add one or more identity group to existing epistemological approaches, political strategies or research methodologies in order to explain power relationships and their impact on people (May 22, 23).

Since race and gender are two main categories of oppression, it is necessary for the purpose of this study to provide a definition of each of these terms. In *Sex and Racism in America*, Hernton Calvin defines racism as the “man-made, man-enforced phenomenon” between different groups of people, particularly when their physical characteristics differ significantly (178). Racism is the learned behaviours and emotions that manifest themselves as prejudice and discrimination and that “compel one group to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if, it did not belong to the human race” (Calvin 178). This phenomenon is deeply rooted in social psychology and involves various cognitive, emotional, and social processes. Racism is also a functional social institution that influences the distribution of power, jobs and life opportunities of segregated groups (Calvin 178). Similar to the concept of race as a social construct is the concept of gender which is defined, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, as “a group of people in a society who share particular qualities or ways of behaving which that society associates with being male, female, or another identity” (“Gender,” def. 1.a).

The intersection of race, class, and gender is seen in three realms of society: the representational realm, the social interaction realm, and the social structural realm (Andersen and Collins 55). Thus, race, class and gender shape human relationships, identities, social institutions, and the societal issues that emerge from

within these institutions. While the multiple intersecting social centers of inequality of race, class and gender offer a theoretical framework to examine characters' experiences, double-consciousness and interactions with others, the matrix of domination accentuates the organization of power relationships and systems of oppression in society and the access of individuals to institutional and power privileges contributing to a better comprehension of the relationship of black feminist tradition of knowledge to activism and empowerment of Black women (Collins, *Black Feminist* 227).

Collins contends that black feminist epistemology should reinforce models of community which emphasize connections, caring, and personal accountability (*Black Feminist* 265-266). Likewise, Bell Hooks in *Yearning Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, stresses the interconnected structural nature of systems of oppression such as "racism, sexism, class elitism" pointing out the necessity of transforming the "whole" system and not merely a single system of discrimination and disadvantage to eliminate injustices and inequality (xii). The theory of intersectionality, in these terms, is featured as a method of framing a different discourse encouraging the transformation of the system of oppression as a whole. As such, "the significance of intersectional paradigms is not only in explaining Black women's experiences, but also "the overall organization of social structure and culture itself" (Collins "Gender, Black Feminism" 41-53).

Brianna's Intersectional Identity

The term "intersectional identity" means that different forms of discrimination and privilege often intersect and create unique challenges for people with multiple identities or intersectional attributes, such as race, gender, or class ("Intersectionality and Its Importance in the Fight for Equality"). As a novel offering a powerful exploration of overlapping forms of disadvantage and oppression, *On the Come Up*

offers a nuanced investigation of Brianna's intersectional identity. Indeed, Brianna's identity is a complex one as a black, female, low-income, creative teenager whose resistance of intersecting social categories of oppression of race, class and gender (i.e., RCG paradigms), ultimately, becomes a potential toward self-definition. Holding on to her principal means of self-expression and financial profit, Brianna pursues her dream of becoming a rapper supported by her family members and friends.

Evidently, the author, Angie Thomas, identifies herself with Brianna who narrates the events of the novel in the first-person narrative. Thomas also dedicates the novel to “the kids with the Sound Cloud accounts and big dreams” (Thomas). In an interview of the author, she admits that the inspiration of the character of Brianna comes from her teenage-years when she dreamt of becoming a rapper, herself (“Angie Thomas Interview - On the Come Up”). The novel is also dedicated to Thomas's mother who has always supported her and believed in her creative ability.

As stated previously, the dynamics of race and gender paradigms influence and shape Brianna's intersectional identity as an unprivileged Afro-American young female. Angie Thomas explains that *On the Come Up* deals with a critical moment in the life of Brianna, a 16-year old teenager and the daughter of a deceased, underground rap legend whose main aim is to find her true voice. Significantly, her life turns upside down after her rap single “On the Come Up” is uploaded by her friends. She has written the lyrics of her hip hop single about her school guards' brutality, herself. The single goes viral in the media for all the wrong reasons. Being an effective means of self-expression, this hip hop single which is inspired by the violence of the school guards towards black students leads to the entanglement of Brianna in a social controversy that is even worsened by her family's difficult financial situation (“Angie Thomas-*On the Come Up*”).

Since intersectionality of race and gender is a salient characteristic of Brianna's experiences in *On the Come Up*, she faces an identity crisis at the beginning of the novel. Confronted with economic pressures as well as the social pressures of racist and gender objectification and dehumanization at school, Brianna doubts her self-worth. Accordingly, she submits to Supreme's suggestion to assume the negative image of the black, gangster, hip hop singer, and she even makes Supreme, her manager at the beginning of the novel. She also looks up to her maternal Aunt Pooh as a model of power and strength despite the latter's racial, class and sexual identities as a poor, black lesbian who is driven toward a life of crime. These interactions suggest the impact of the interpersonal domain of power on Brianna's life. Nevertheless, Brianna experiences a fit of rage during her interview with DJ Hype discerning that she is not just "playing the role" of a gangster hip hop singer, but has actually become such person (*On the Come Up* 346). With aunt Pooh's arrest for drug dealing, Brianna comprehends her own misguided assumptions, and fires Supreme. In this manner, she decides to amend her ways, and opts for realizing her self-identity.

Being intertwined, the categories of race and class also inform the expectations of Brianna's family. While Brianna seeks to assert herself through her music, she is also met with resistance, in particular her mother's. Indeed, Jay's initial response to Brianna's dream of becoming a rapper embodies a fusion of concern for her daughter's well fare and her motherly protective instincts; Jay disapproves of her daughter's decision to become a rapper because she believes that obtaining an education over anything, *including rapping* is the only way out of the financial and social problems facing a black individual (*On the Come Up* 51).

Both Brianna and Jay, however, gradually develop a mutual understanding and trust in each other which improves their relationship to the extent that the former

starts confiding in the latter. On this account, Jay becomes confident of her daughter's potential to become a successful rapper, and she finally encourages her daughter's dream. This helps to grant Brianna a voice to defy the interplay of racial stereotyping, economic pressures and gender inequality, placing her on the route toward self-definition.

The Role of Power Structures in the lives of both Jay Jackson and Aunt Pooh

Evidently, Jay Jackson, Brianna's mother and her Aunt Pooh are subjected to discrimination by the structural and hegemonic domains of power, that is to say, the various structural and ideological power systems represented in the forms of education, work opportunities, family, and false ideas; both are impoverished black women owing to their lack of good education which in turn minimizes their life opportunities. Therefore, the integrative paradigm of race, class and gender emphasize intersectionality in regards to the experiences of women, especially, women of color and ethnic minorities like Jay and Aunt Pooh (Collins "Gender, Black Feminism" 158,59). Such integrative paradigm identifies how capitalism, patriarchy, and racism interconnect, contributing to poverty among these groups in the United States.

According to Collin's paradigm of the matrix of domination, the concepts and practices recurring across multiple oppressive power systems play a crucial role in understanding how race, class, gender and nation are mutually constructed through their interaction with each other

("Gender, Black Feminism "47,48). In her analysis of black political economy, Collins places Afro-American women's experiences of family and work at the center of analysis to provide a better comprehension of black women's poverty. She argues that, generally, "Black women lack assets, property, or wealth. Income-based approaches emphasize a well-paying job as an important source of Black women's

income” (Collins “Gender, Black Feminism” 46). Examining black women’s poverty within the “work/family nexus framework” illuminates how gender hierarchies affect black women's income in ways that go beyond simple gender-based wage discrimination (Collins, “Gender, Black Feminism” 45). Besides, Black women’s poverty is not only caused by low-paying jobs, but also by the fact that they work both in the public and the private spheres, doing their jobs, and simultaneously, doing the house work and caring for their children which is a second unpaid job (Collins, “Gender, Black Feminism” 45).

Like Collins’s structural and Ideological interrelated domains of power ,Hellen A. Neville., and Jennifer Hamer identify/ two complex, interlocking power systems, that serve the oppression of black women, namely, structural and ideological oppressions. These structural social systems include “political, economic, and social institutions (e.g., education, law enforcement, military, prison, work relations, and family roles) as well as the built environment (i.e., the organization and development of social space and infrastructures, including ghettos or barrios)” (441). These structural systems together with the interlocking categories of race, class and gender preserve and perpetuate political and economic domination by men, especially “White elite men” (Neville 441). On the other hand, ideological oppression is defined as "a system of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts) possessing a historical existence and a role within a given society (Althusser 231). In spite of such forms of oppression and discrimination that preserve the poverty of black families supported by single women like Jay and her initial wrong decisions, she becomes self-empowered to find “ a way to feed [her family] and other people, too”(On the Come Up 101).

In fact, the structural systems of family , education and work as well as gender hierarchies are all power structures operating in the lives of both Jay and Aunt Pooh,

profoundly influencing the individual experiences and perceptions of each. Initially, Jay abandons her two children, Brianna and Trey because of her drug addiction. Her psychological and financial problems are mainly caused by the death of her husband who falls prey to the set of false social images or representations imposed on black people by white supremacy. Lawless, Jay's husband is shot to death by a fellow-gangster; as an underground rap legend, he is misguided by Supreme, his manager, to play the role of a Ghetto Rapper aspiring to gain a quick rise to fame and fortune. Nonetheless, Lawless is ultimately murdered. Unable to cope with the sudden death of her husband, Jay easily falls prey to drug addiction and is imprisoned, leaving both her children to be brought up by their grandparents as she becomes incapable of financially, or mentally caring for them. In addition to her psychological problems, Jay's intersectional identities of race and gender as a black female who lacks a proper education, heavily undermine her work opportunities; the only job she later finds is in the local church.

Jay is only reunited with her two children when she is cured of drug addiction and is able to obtain a full-time job at the local, Christ Temple Church which she eventually loses in the course of the novel (*On the Come Up* 74). Collins underscores the disadvantaged situation of the single black mother highlighting the impact of the component of "gender" on financial "income" since women in that state lack both the help of the unpaid work of the man at home as well as his financial support of the children ("Gender, Black Feminism" 46). According to Collins, the capitalist system reinforces patriarchy by maintaining women's economic dependence on men, while patriarchy simultaneously sustains capitalism by providing a pool of low-paid and unpaid female ("Gender, Black Feminism" 46). This framework of disadvantage and oppression illustrates how capitalism, or the white male elite fosters systems of race, class, and gender (RCG) inequality,

emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of these interrelated oppressions in social justice discourse (Collins “Gender , Black Feminism”168).

In spite of her disadvantaged situation due to multiple injustices, Jay is able to regain Brianna’s confidence in her as a mother supporting her daughter through her various difficulties , holding herself accountable for her faults and acting responsibly towards her children. In the words of Brianna, her mother displays the “superpower that black mommas possess – they can somehow go from being gentle to firm in a matter of seconds” (*On the Come Up* 384). Finally, in defense of Brianna against the school’s oppressive system, Jay stands up to the school’s white superintendent, Dr. Cook, who offers her an apology and a job. Thereby, Jay achieves self-definition by voicing her opinion, and Brianna comprehends her mother’s struggles and complex life experience. Indeed, both Jay and Aunt Pooh represent the strong female bond that provides a support network and helps Brianna develop a sense of self-worth in the novel

Similar to Jay, Aunt Pooh’s life opportunities, in general, and her opportunities in the job market, in particular, are remarkably limited due to the impact of structural and ideological power structures on her life experiences and opportunities. Both Jay and Aunt Pooh live in the segregated black neighbourhood of Garden Heights which disadvantages their opportunities of proper education and a suitable work opportunity. Nonetheless, as Brianna’s maternal aunt, Aunt Pooh plays a pivotal role in Brianna's life, offering support and encouragement for her rap career. However, unlike Jay who believes in playing by the societal rules assuming the role of the powerless black woman and rejecting an adoption of the controlling image of black violence, Aunt Pooh is a lesbian who lives the life of a black hoodlum and adopts the stereotype of black aggression and violence. As a drug dealer and a member of a local gang, Aunt Pooh is able to provide her family with financial

assistance. She also introduces Brianna to the hip-hop world, becoming her mentor in her pursuit of a rap career.

Although a vibrant personality, and a supporter of her family, Aunt Pooh's criminal life choices complicate her role as Brianna's mentor. While Aunt Pooh genuinely wants to help Brianna escape the cycle of poverty, her own entanglement in crime often undermines her ability to be reliable. For instance, she abandons Brianna at critical moments, such as missing her first recording session. The complexity of Aunt Pooh's moral stance as a black lesbian gangster illustrates the dilemma faced by black individuals living in underprivileged communities and influenced by interlocking forms of systemic inequality of race and class and sexuality. Thus, she deviates from white social norms resorting to crime as a means of survival in an environment of limited opportunities. Aunt Pooh's internal conflict is evident when she reacts negatively to Brianna's rap single about gang life as she points out that this single motivates violence (*On the Come Up* 214). Furthermore, she does not exploit Brianna's talent for her gain, urges her to stay true to herself and avoid glorifying the harsh realities of gangster life as she has done in her rap single, "On the Come Up".

The intersectionality of race, class and sexuality as well as the impact of structural and hegemonic domains of power on the lives of black people, including that of Aunt Pooh as a gangster lesbian, is noted by Brianna. She wonders about Aunt Pooh being a drug-dealer who does "everything [they]'ve been told not to do" and has money, whereas her brother, Trey, does "everything right" and still suffers from financial problems (*On the Come Up* 214). Life in Brianna's black neighbourhood is "messed up", and the drug dealers in her "neighborhood aren't struggling. Everybody else is" (*On the Come Up* 214). Brianna's observation illuminates the operation of overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage

in the life experiences and identities of individuals in her underprivileged community at large making it difficult and irrelevant for black people to adhere to white social norms.

On the other hand, Aunt Pooh's relationship with her family "encourage models of community" which emphasize "connections" and "caring" (Collins *Black Feminist* 265). However, her criminal way of life endangers the lives of her family members and exposes them to police brutality and gang violence (Collins *Black Feminist* 266). In addition, Aunt Pooh's inability to extricate herself from a life of crime marks the challenges of breaking free from cycles of poverty, and falling in the pit of crime as a result of the operation of power structures and the overlapping identities of race, class and gender in the lives of underprivileged individuals like herself.

The Stereotype of Blackness as Aggression

Stereotyping is similar to a controlling image which is a "generalized representation about a group" based upon race or gender (Tamara 22). According to Collins's paradigm of matrix of domination, the hegemonic domain of power represented in the controlling images or stereotypes attached to black women serve to justify social injustices as "natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 69). Because of her multiple identities of race, class and gender, Brianna experiences discrimination, objectification and stereotyping. Blackness is usually associated with aggression and violence in American society according to Crenshaw's definition of representational intersectionality (Crenshaw "Mapping the Margins" 1283).

The multifaceted, complex character of the protagonist, Brianna in *On the Come Up* defies white patriarchal stereotyping of Afro-American people. In "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black

Feminist Thought” (1986), Collins elucidates how black women are defined in terms of the white man’s negative “other” which devalues and objectifies them:

Since Black women have been denied the authority to challenge these definitions, this model consists of images that define Black women as a negative other, the virtual antithesis of positive white male images . Moreover...‘domination always involves the objectification of the dominated; all forms of oppression imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed.’. (18)

Although a predominantly white art school, Middleton Art School, which Brianna attends, is considered a “diverse” school as it includes coloured and black students (*On the Come Up* 53). Nevertheless, Brianna is objectified and devalued as a negative “other” by her teachers, the school staff and her white colleagues ; Brianna complains of being constantly singled out at school (*On the Come Up* 96). She is also considered aggressive , confrontational and argumentative by both her teachers and the school principal for voicing out her opinions (*On the Come Up* 69) . In addition, Brianna is often labeled as a “hoodlum” and is never treated as a human being (*On the Come Up* 70) . In fact, Brianna’s overlapping racial and gender identities which are influenced by the ideological power system of stereotypical images of blackness expose her to the aggressive, inhumane treatment of the guards, Tate and Long at school as they “pin her down to the ground” in suspicion of drug acquisition (*On the Come Up* 63). Brianna’s subjectivity is, hence, devalued and objectified since she is viewed in a negative light as the antithesis of the positive image of the socially and culturally dominant white man.

Although a black man himself, Long’s behaviour is a manifestation of the adoption of the sexist/patriarchal politics and of white supremacy as well as the acceptance of the prevalent beliefs that men are the superior to women. Although

disempowered by the white male power structure, Long, the school guard, seems to be eager to gain access to that power (Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* 122-62). In fact, the two school guards' abusive treatment of Brianna demonstrates the intersectionality of racist and sexist attitudes in the American society. Moreover, this act of aggression and restraint is rooted in racial and patriarchal prejudice against black people, in general, and black females, in particular. Such act of violence as well as Brianna's detention lead Jay to pose the following rhetorical question to the school principal: "Do the white girls who make slick comments get sent to your office every other week too?" (*On the Come Up* 69,70).

Crenshaw asserts that experiences of male violence against women of certain racial identities are "frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" ("Mapping the Margins" 1243). Crenshaw also maintains that the marginalization of women of colour is legitimized by institutionalized discourses of the legal system as well as discourses of resistance, like feminist and antiracist theories that produce and legitimize existing power relations. Above all, by marginalizing, silencing and victimizing black women, the power of overlapping systems of oppression perpetuates harm and violence (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1241-99). This is not only evident in the violence Brianna is exposed to at the hands of the school guards, but also in legitimization of such act by the school principal, Mrs. Rhodes who disregards such an abusive act and keeps Brianna handcuffed in her office. Furthermore, disciplinary action is not taken against Tate and long after Brianna is proven innocent of the accusation of drug-dealing at school (*On the Come Up* 227). Such incidents illustrate the interplay between the disciplinary domains of power, whereby the organizational rules manage power relations and are used to control a certain social group, i.e. black young women in a

discriminatory manner; and the hegemonic domain of power according to which the ideas developed by the dominant group justifies their practices against black women.

On the other hand, Collins's paradigm of the matrix of domination describes four interrelated domains that organize power relations in society, among which is the hegemonic or ideological domain. Collins explains further that ideology, culture, and consciousness normalize the beliefs of the dominant white social group as common sense ideas that support their position. Moreover, many members of subordinated groups might endorse these ideas as well (Collins *Black Feminist* 285). Hooks seconds this position, holding that the growth of capitalist materialistic consumption values has influenced media representation of Afro-Americans in the eighties and nineties. In turn, the power dynamics of media has transformed black people's criticism of the dominant cultural images of themselves to an acceptance of the black social identities represented by the media as well as an acceptance of a solution of black issues based on the principle of equality by means of inclusion in the dominant white culture (Hooks, *Yearning* 6).

In fact, this position is evident in Supreme's case ; he endorses the prevalent controlling images of blackness as aggression and violence, and urges Lawless, Brianna's father to assume this identity of the gangster , hip hop singer. Nonetheless, in Lawless's case, he does not only submit to this negative image, but he also becomes one in reality, especially, when he joins a local gang . Eventually, Lawless is murdered at the hands of one of the gang's members. As an upcoming rapper, Brianna is similarly persuaded to assume the role of a hoodlum or the stereotypical image of a black "Ghetto Rapper" in order to gain popularity among white youth who would form the majority of her fans (*On the Come Up* 210).

According to Hooks, the development of the critique of materialistic consumerism has enabled Afro-Americans to survive class discrimination

(*Yearning* 2). The “collective critical black gaze” developed in the context of resistance “to overt racist discrimination and racial violence” in the sixties and seventies as the media screened images of violence in race riots led to proliferation of the image of black violence and its assimilation by white viewers who gained pleasure and satisfaction through the consumption of these image which perpetuated racism (Hooks, *Yearning* 4).

The spreading of the “‘drug dealer’ narrative” about Brianna after the incident of her abuse at the hands of the school guards results into the sustenance of the negative controlling image of the gangster teenager associated with the stereotype of blackness as aggression and violence (*On the Come Up* 232). Consequently, the brutal treatment and the abuse Brianna is exposed to at the hands of the school guards is normalized and justified by the school principal, Dr. Rhodes. Brianna, however, upholds the critical black gaze when she criticizes the educational system which eludes the inclusion of black slave history in the curriculum; she even possesses the audacity to express this opinion to her teacher in class. Defying and resisting the oppressive systems of race and class, Brianna attempts, early in the novel, to dismantle normalized oppression and reclaim agency.

Brianna's Multiple Worlds

Intersectionality theory posits that systems of oppression, for example, education, economics, and religion, perpetuate violence against women-identifying individuals in a “broad-scale system of domination” (Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins” 1241). This system of domination is mainly sustained to preserve the capitalist economic and patriarchal status quo. In this sense, Brianna and her family's opportunities for education and social elevation are minimal, hence, her grandmother frequent noting that Trey her grandson is “magnum cum laude” (*On the Come Up* 16). Brianna comes from a low-income family supported by a single

mother who once suffered from drug addiction. Furthermore, the disadvantages of race overlap with poverty and economic struggle as Brianna's family experiences housing insecurity as well as electricity and gas cuts. Such economic and class conditions deeply impact Brianna's life driving her to sell candy in school. Moreover, Jay's loss of her job at the church, leads to Brianna's constant fear of the family going hungry, a predicament they have experienced before. Even Brianna's erudite, brother, Trey, who has a college education, is forced by his limited job opportunities to provide the family with financial support by selling pizza.

Characterizing the struggle black American women face living in two contradictory worlds, Katie Cannon observes, that throughout the history of the United States, "the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle-a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed" (30). Owing to her multiple, overlapping identities, Brianna navigates the dualities of black/white, poor/affluent, female/male. Her dualistic worlds are both black and white worlds, hence, she confronts the challenge of being seen as a black girl in a predominantly white society, where she is often judged and stereotyped as aggressive and violent; with the video of her song going viral on the media, she earns the name of a "ghetto, ratchet, a hood rat with no home training" which she dislikes (*On the Come Up* 213). In fact, Brianna is aware of how others at her school and in the media see her, particularly in terms of racial stereotypes and biases. This awareness initially forces her to appropriate and consent to the oppressive controlling image of a blackness as aggression imposed upon her by white patriarchal supremacy (Banks).

Brianna also confronts the duality of male/ female in the hip hop music industry. In an attempt to resist gender discrimination, she perceives the

“misogynistic” nature of the hip hop music industry reflecting on “the small ratio of women to men in hip-hop” (*On the Come Up* 29) Indeed, Brianna’s intersectional identities and interactions in the rap industry illuminate the role played by gender dynamics and sexism in this male-dominated industry. As a female rapper, double standard is involved in viewing the type of hip hop lyrics she composes and performs mainly because they are free expressions of her opinions and identity which also illuminates the impact of the hegemonic domain of power on her life. In addition, when Supreme takes Brianna for the first time to a real studio to sign her first record deal, she refuses to record the song that is written for her mainly because the lyrics are extremely sexist and violent, realizing that she has followed Supreme into the studio “ like the desperate idiot that [she is]” (*On the Come Up* 374).

Living in a socioeconomic divide, Brianna navigates the dual world of poverty versus affluence. Her family struggles financially, yet she interacts with more affluent peers through her school and rap career. This socioeconomic divide adds another layer to her experience of multiple worlds, as she must reconcile her own poor economic reality with the expectations of those around her. Moreover, the racial discrimination Brianna experiences, especially at school leads to an internalized sense of self-doubt and negative stereotypes, reflecting the impact of capitalist and patriarchal forms of oppression on her mental health. Rather than pursuing a long journey of academic education, rap represents a more viable career option for Brianna. This is mainly perpetuated by her successful experience in the Ring where some of the kids call her “Li'l Law” out of admiration , linking her to her father’s rap legacy (*On the Come Up* 28). Consequently, she views a rap career as a means of financial support for her family while doing something she loves. In fact, Brianna’s successful performance in the Ring elevates her confidence in her creativity raising the question whether traditional education is the only means of

achieving success and highlighting the influence of the structural domain of power on the lives of underprivileged individuals like herself.

Shaping her own “counter-hegemonic” identity by making her own life choices, which is in keeping with her own authentic self-perspective, Brianna is able to confront and depart from dominant racist notions of black Americans’ identity as a dangerous “other” (Hooks, *Yearning* 1,2). Brianna also asserts her autonomy and defies traditional expectations placed on black women. In this manner, she attempts to overcome the challenges of her multiple world which encompasses various disadvantages and oppressive interactions by asserting her diverse identities as a black, economically underprivileged female, yet a resourceful, intelligent and creative one.

Power Dynamics and Self-Definition

In the theoretical framework of racism as a significant power dynamic in white societies, Charles Mills (1996) describes what he calls the “racial contract” through which white capitalist supremacy has organized societies for their own benefit and at the expense of peoples of colour. Mills argues that “white supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today” (127). “Whiteness”, he writes, “is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations” operating within the fabric of historically constructed social identities (Mills 127). In addition, the socially constructed categories of race, class, and gender do not operate alone, but within a system of simultaneous, interrelated social relationships— or matrix of domination illuminating their close connectedness to various power structures (Andersen and Collins 51, 53).

Referring to the power dynamic of the unnamed political system of white supremacy which determines the life of underprivileged groups like herself, Brianna states that “[all] these people[she’s] never met have way more control over[her] life

than [she's] ever had" (*On the Come Up* 79). Because of their socially constructed identities of race and class, black teenagers living in Garden Heights are frequently subjected to police brutality in *On the Come Up*.

Likewise, Brianna and the other coloured students at Middleton Art School are perceived as an inferior group among a superior majority of white students; they are subjected to discrimination

(and sometimes violence) by school staff as well as by media perceptions.

Combined with race and class, gender is also an ideological component in that ideas about gender and gender relations serve to protect the status quo, that is, the current system of gender domination in which women experience institutional discrimination and exploitation in the home, work, and social milieu. This attests to the role of the structural and hegemonic domains of power in maintaining oppression and disadvantage of people of intersectional identities. In part, gender ideologies are manifested and perpetuated by false representations of women as inferior (especially in the areas of intellect, emotional stability, technical knowledge and skill, and conceptual thinking) and the simultaneous representations of men, particularly white men, as superior (Neville 450). These false representations of women of intersectional identities are perpetuated by media images, educational practices, and public discourse (Neville 450).

Such sexist misrepresentations of women heavily impact Brianna's life experience and perceptions. For instance, when Brianna's hip hop single, "On the Come Up" gains popularity, it is interpreted as a confirmation of Brianna's negative identity of the black aggressive female. In fact, the media representation of this rap single which deals with police brutality against black and coloured teenagers as well as her school guards brutality, exposes how white prejudice denies privileges and protection of childhood to black teenagers, such as Brianna. Furthermore, the article

published in the local newspaper by the white writer Emily Taylor on this subject, describes Brianna as “a gang-affiliated unruly teen” whose song encourages violence and asks for removing Brianna’s single from the internet , mainly, because Taylor’s thirteen-year-old son loves to listen to it (*On the Come Up* 258). When Brianna learns that Taylor calls upon readers to “protect [their] children” from her violent lyrics, she immediately comprehends that as a black teenager who has experienced actual police brutality, she is excluded from what Taylor means by “our children”. Brianna’s reaction is that no one can silence her voice - the only tool of self-expression she possesses.

Emphasizing the unique experiences of black American women, Collins contends that efforts to reclaim U.S. black women’s intellectual traditions have revealed black women’s long-standing attention to additional core themes (that vary among black women according to class, age and region) in terms of specific issues encompassing black feminism within a “a wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment” of black women and of humanity at large (Collins *Black Feminist* 27. 41, 42). One of these core themes is to establish positive, multiple images and to repel negative, dominating representations of black womanhood. A second core theme is that black women can confront and dismantle the overarching and interlocking structure of domination in terms of race, class, and gender oppression (Taylor 234,35). Indeed, these two core themes bear relevance to the novel.

Utilizing the first -person narrative as the narrator of the novel, Brianna, primarily, challenges the stereotype of the black aggressive female and attempts to establish her own authentic identity by confronting and dismantling the overarching, interlocking structure of domination on her own terms. For instance, Brianna (gives expression to her true self when she wins a battle against Miles in the Ring, and her performance is met with thunderous applause. In the first round of the battle, Brianna

accuses Supreme's son, Miles, of being a fake rapper performing a prewritten song, and violating the rule of the Ring that compels rappers to freestyle and speak from the heart after he had insulted her father in his performance. At this "magical" moment, Brianna lives up to her true self by clearing her father's image in her performance, disclosing the fake world she lives in, and finding her authentic power (*On the Come Up* 42-44) .

Brianna also defies gender discrimination within the hip hop industry as she observes that women working in this industry are often marginalized and subjected to sexist attitudes. For instance, when she enters "The Ring" for her first rap battle, she notes the overwhelming presence of men compared to that of women and describes it as reflective of the gender imbalance in hip hop culture. This observation highlights how gender and race dynamics intertwine, affecting the perception of women of color and leading to their subjection to discrimination and oppression within their various social milieus. Nevertheless, Brianna navigates her creativity composing and performing her rap songs, and employing her creativity as a tool which offers her a voice to challenge oppressive social structures and express her authentic identity.

The question of the "power" of black American people is raised in a conversation between Brianna and Jay after Brianna is attacked by the security guards at school, just before Jay tells Brianna that she lost her job at the church. In this conversation, Jay explains the fundamental inequities of the white patriarchal social system they live in, emphasizing that the life of black people is more complex than that of white people. Jay uses the metaphor of a chess game where the rules are complicated, and the pieces are arranged in a complex hierarchy, with less powerful pieces strategically sacrificed in order to preserve the more powerful ones. Highlighting the intersection of the social categories of race and class which lead to

the injustices of discrimination and oppression, Jay argues that black people are stuck in an unfair chess game, hindered by a disempowering set of rules. In other words, if Brianna expresses herself, makes mistakes, or defies authority, she should expect punishment, and even violence in response to her actions (*On the Come Up* 73).

Nonetheless, Brianna actively finds agency through her voice. Indeed, her agency, creativity, and determination challenge dominant power structures which oppress and place black people at a point of social and economic disadvantage. Thus, she announces that she would rather act like a responsible adult and obtain a song contract to save her family from poverty than “enjoy [her] childhood” as her mother advises her to do since she prefers to “grow up than be homeless”(*On the Come Up* 188,89). As such, Brianna realizes that her experiences with racism , poverty and patriarchal norms underscore the need for resistance through both self-expression and self-definition.

According to Collins, self-definition is “the power to name one's own reality” (*Black Feminist* 300). In these terms, self-definition can be only actualized when a black woman, such as Brianna, rejects the controlling or stereotypical images imposed by societal structures of race, class and gender, and instead force her own authentic self-definition manifesting a “collective black women's consciousness” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 98). In addition, an important part of Brianna’s journey toward self-definition is affirmation, which takes place in the individual friendships and familial relationships of black women. Collins also describes self-definition as a process or a “journey from internalized oppression to the ‘free mind’” (*Black Feminist* 112). In *On the Come Up*, such process is, in part, generated by familial support when Jay urges Brianna to think about who she really is, which gives

Brianna the courage to fire Supreme and start the journey towards her own freedom of mind as well as her route towards achieving fame and fortune.

Although Brianna has feelings for her friend Malik at first, she, eventually, perceives that this relationship has no future. On the other hand, a romantic relationship develops between Brianna and Curtis encouraging the former to come to terms with her psychological trauma, namely, being abandoned by her mother during her childhood, which is a necessary step in Brianna's journey towards self-definition as well. Brianna and Curtis's romantic relationship is influenced by the fact that both of them have been abandoned by their mothers during their childhood. Brianna lives with her grandparents for several years as Jay struggles with addiction, while Curtis's mother is incarcerated for years.

Since Curtis is Brianna's steadfast defender at school, their acquaintance is eventually transformed into a romantic attachment. Brianna's own struggle to reestablish her relationship with her mother helps her identify with Curtis. When Curtis tells her that he has stopped visiting his mother in prison because he does not know how to help her, Brianna suggests that Curtis's mother would just want to see him. On the other hand, Brianna knows that her mother loves her, yet, she rarely confides in her. Although Brianna defends Jay against her disparagers, such as her grandmother, she distrusts Jay's stability as a mother (*On the Come Up* 219-20). Likewise, Curtis is skeptical of his mother's capacity to perform her motherly duty of caring for him, indicating the psychological trauma caused by abandonment for both of Curtis and Brianna. By resolving this psychological trauma and appreciating her mother's protective love, Brianna develops an understanding of both Jay's psychological struggle of losing her husband and her financial struggle in a racist and sexist social system especially when the latter stands up to the school's white superintendent. Like Jay, Brianna is empowered with the self-knowledge she gains

about her authentic identity as a black female seeking justice against racial oppression.

As a black female who has embarked on the process of developing a consciousness of the various intersecting forms of societal oppression imposed upon her, Brianna is able to improve the condition for her empowerment on her own terms (Taylor 235). When her single “On the Come Up” spirals out of control, Brianna makes misguided public statements and places material possessions, like her father’s chain, above her friends. Eventually, she realizes that she has developed a personality she dislikes, and acknowledges the need to embark on a transformation process toward self-definition. For Brianna, Supreme’s adverse philosophy of the necessity to assume the character of the Ghetto Rapper is an offence against the hip-hop culture as a medium of self-expression.

Brianna becomes capable of self-empowerment when she rejects the role of a Ghetto rapper and fires Supreme as her manager. Such action also marks a growing ability to find her own voice and assert her autonomy. By pursuing her passion for rap despite skepticism from others, her creativity becomes an instrument of her activism expressing her anti-racist and anti-sexist views and emphasizing the role of art in challenging a social milieu of systematic oppression of race, class and gender. Accordingly, she becomes qualified to deconstruct the interlocking matrix of domination regulating and normalizing various forms of discrimination and oppression against her as a black, economically underprivileged female.

Conclusion

In Angie Thomas’s *On the Come Up*, Brianna’s journey is a powerful illustration of intersectionality in action. Through the lens of the multiple intersecting social centers of inequality of race, class, and gender, the novel discloses the unique challenges and systemic oppression faced by Brianna Jackson, a young,

Black woman striving for freedom, self-expression and success in a society rife with forms of discriminations and economic disparity. Indeed, the application of the paradigm of the matrix of domination to the analysis of the novel reveals how these intersecting levels of oppression originate from societal power structures, impacting the life experiences and perceptions of Brianna, her mother Jay Jackson, and her Aunt Pooh.

The paradigm of the matrix of domination illuminates how race, class, and gender are mutually constructed through their interaction within a system of power relations. Such interaction demonstrates how power structures embedded in social institutions perpetuate domination and inequality. In the novel, Jay Jackson is a single Black mother recovering from addiction and grappling with poverty, making her an embodiment of the struggles imposed by systemic oppression. Thus, Jay's initial resistance to Brianna's aspirations reflects societal pressures that prioritize education as the only viable route for Black women to escape poverty. Similarly, Aunt Pooh's involvement in criminal activities underscores how systemic barriers often leave marginalized individuals with limited options for survival. Although these narratives reveal how societal structures—such as economic systems, cultural stereotypes and sexism—reinforce the matrix of domination by shaping opportunities and limiting agency, Brianna, the protagonist, eventually, gains clarity about her identity and rejects the exploitative influences of Supreme in an attempt to dismantle these imposed roles. Overall, her transformation illuminates the importance of self-definition in resisting systemic oppression.

Indeed, *On the Come Up* underscores the limitations of single-axis analyses of discrimination, emphasizing the ways in which these forces compound and shape Brianna's experiences within the matrix of domination. Brianna's struggle to find her voice and establish a career as a rapper is not solely a matter of talent or ambition

but is inextricably linked to the intersection of the racial , economic and gender realities of her identity. As Brianna navigates the structural, disciplinary, interpersonal, and hegemonic domains of power, she grapples with the controlling images and societal expectations that seek to define her. The novel ultimately champions the importance of self-definition and authenticity as forms of individual activism in overcoming various intersecting oppressions. Overall, Brianna's character evolution demonstrates that by embracing her true self and defying societal expectations and the power structures that seek to define her, she can navigate the complexities of her intersectional identity and pave her own route to self-expression.

In conclusion, *On the Come Up* serves as a powerful critique of the matrix of domination while offering a message of hope and resilience. By exploring themes of intersectionality and systemic inequality, Thomas not only sheds light on the lived realities of marginalized communities but also emphasizes the potential for empowerment through solidarity, self-expression, and familial support. The evolving relationship between Brianna and her mother illustrates how mutual understanding can challenge oppressive norms and create positive pathways for change. Through its nuanced portrayal of intersecting oppressions and acts of resistance, the novel aligns with black feminist thought by advocating for both individual empowerment and collective transformation within oppressive social systems.

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التقاطعية ومصفوفة الهيمنة في رواية "نحو التآلق" (2019) للكاتبة أنجي توماس

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المستخلص:

يتناول البحث رواية "نحو التآلق" (2019) للكاتبة أنجي توماس من خلال مراحل تكوين شخصية بطلة الرواية و أطر التقاطعية ومصفوفة الهيمنة، مع التركيز على كيفية تتجلى أنظمة العرق والطبقة والنوع الجندي لتشكيل تجارب بطلة الرواية، بريانا جاكسون، وعائلتها. استناداً إلى نظرية كيمبرلي كرينشو في التقاطعية ومفهوم باتريشيا هيل كولينز لمصفوفة الهيمنة، تستكشف الدراسة كيف تتجلى أنظمة القمع المتداخلة - الصور النمطية العنصرية، والصعوبات الاقتصادية، والتحيز الجنسي - في حياة بريانا والدتها جاي جاكسون وخالتها بو. يسلط التحليل الضوء على كيف أن هوية بريانا كمراهقة سوداء من الطبقة الفقيرة تعرضها لأشكال فريدة من التمييز العنصري والتهميش، لا سيما في سياق سعيها وراء مهنة موسيقى الراب. يتم تفسير الرواية على أنها نقد للهياكل المجتمعية التي تديم الصور النمطية وتحد من الفرص المتاحة للشباب السود، وخاصة الشابات. تتناول الورقة أيضاً تنقل الشخصيات في هياكل السلطة، ونضال بريانا من أجل استكشاف الذات، ودور دعم الأسرة والمجتمع في تعزيز التمكين والمقاومة. وفي نهاية المطاف، تزعم الدراسة أن رواية "نحو التآلق" لا تسلط الضوء على تعقيدات الاضطهاد المتقاطع فحسب، بل تؤكد أيضاً على أهمية الأصالة الذاتية والتضامن العائلي في تحدي مصفوفة الهيمنة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية المتقاطعة: مصفوفة الهيمنة؛ التمكين؛ الأصالة/استكشاف الذات