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# 1. Introduction

But the black body comes prejudged, and as a result it is placed in needless jeopardy. To be black is to bear the brunt of selective enforcement of the law, and to inhabit a psychic unsteadiness in which there is no guarantee of personal safety. You are a black body first, before you are a kid walking down the street or a Harvard professor who has misplaced his keys. (Cole 13-14)

Blackness in white-dominated societies like the United States often bears pejorative associations with danger, criminality, or inferiority. This makes black individuals more vulnerable to violence, as can be observed in the mounting evidence of police brutality targeted at African Americans, simply due to their skin color. Having so internalized those negative connotations with blackness, people tend to forget that, as explained by James Baldwin, “[c]olor is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality” (*Fire* 59). And yet, it is the color of people’s skin that largely determines the precariousness of their lives. I agree with Baldwin’s assertion, outlined in his essay “On Being White... And Other Lies,” that people are not inherently black or white but only “defined as Black by the slave trade” (180). Thus, fully aware of the fact that terms like “black” and “white” are politically incorrect, they will be employed in this thesis to show that society is still based on the assumption that race is a biological – and not an artificial and social – construct and that such labels reinforce racial discrimination. Moreover, the words “Negro” and “Nigger,” as used in quotes, will not be censored to preserve the quote’s original force although the terms are clearly not a part of my own linguistic usage. Thus, it should be emphasized that it is at no point my intention to label or judge any group of people based on their ethnic background. Terms related to race are only employed to demonstrate their prevalence in contemporary society’s thinking.

While I have always been a passionate reader of American literature, the idea for this very current topic of my diploma thesis occurred to me during the summer holidays, when I enhanced my interest in contemporary literary trends. Hence, the rise in young adult (YA) fiction inspired by Black Lives Matter (BLM) particularly attracted my attention. As a future English teacher, the literary category of YA is of special interest as I clearly intend to convey the diversity of anglophone literature to my students. YA novels about ongoing contentious issues thus portray the harsh realities of minorities and encourage the students to critically reflect on racial inequality.

This thesis examines three select novels: *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* by the debut writers Angie Thomas and Nic Stone respectively, and *All American Boys* by the black and white duo Jason Reynolds and Brendon Kiely.<sup>1</sup> While all three works depict similar issues about racial inequality, they offer different angles on the topic. Written from a female perspective, *THUG* provides a sensitive glimpse into the protagonist Starr's challenges with racial discrimination. At her young age of 16 years she has already witnessed the killings of two friends. The novel revolves around Khalil's shooting by a police officer when he and Starr were driving home from a party. As Thomas shows the experiences of a black girl, she centers a group that is often underrepresented but equally concerned by racial injustices. *DM* recounts the daily challenges of Justyce in a self-proclaimed colorblind society that does not treat him equally to his white peers and overlooks systemic racism. He is made tragically aware of prevailing racial bias when his friend Manny is shot by a police officer in his car next to Justyce. *AAB* is told by two narrators, a white and a black boy, thereby tackling crucial topics about racism from the perspective of both sides. The black protagonist Rashad is brutally beaten by a police officer as he is wrongly accused of shoplifting. When the white protagonist Quinn becomes a witness of the incident, he begins to critically reflect upon his own white privilege and white ignorance. The overall purpose of the analysis is to identify significant themes surrounding police violence and BLM in the selected novels, thus issues of systemic racism that have led to the status-quo.

To this end, the first part of the thesis consists of a theoretical background about African Americans' situation in the United States. A short glimpse at history and former powerful black movements will be followed by a discussion of mass incarceration and police brutality, which both contribute largely to African Americans' status-quo. Consequently, the current BLM movement, which tries to draw attention to African Americans' plight, will be presented. Judith Butler's ideas about dehumanization expressed in *Precarious Life* serve as a valuable theoretical basis to explain prevalent assumptions about black individuals.

In the second theoretical part, the term YA literature will be defined, and special attention will be drawn to African American YA fiction. Especially after the boom of novels like *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games*, YA literature has evolved into a popular literary category enjoyed by people from all age levels. However, only in recent years has the predominantly white YA book market experienced a rise in more diverse literature from African American authors. As increasing attention was drawn to the killings of unarmed black individuals at the

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of readability, the novels will be abbreviated in the text: *The Hate U Give* (*THUG*), *Dear Martin* (*DM*), and *All American Boys* (*AAB*).

hands of police officers and voices speaking out for black victims, like those of the BLM movement, have emerged, contemporary black authors also more urgently have felt the need to address the issue of police violence in novels for young readers. Thus, as the cry for black humanity becomes more vehement, an increasing number of books about police brutality are being published year on year (see Alter).

The last part of my thesis consists of an analysis of the aforementioned three novels. As all literary works revolve around incidents of police brutality, I will show how violence inflicted upon black people, including psychological violence related to racial discrimination, is reflected in the books. Thereby, parallels will be drawn to BLM and real incidents of police brutality to illustrate the relevance of the topic in today's society.

As African American protagonists have long been underrepresented in YA literature, YA fiction about blacks has also been neglected in the academic field. Accordingly, the recent novels about police brutality and BLM have hardly been treated by researchers. Thus, this thesis aims to enhance existing discourse on African American YA literature and open a dialogue with recent events like police violence reflected in black YA fiction. Thereby, it tries to depict the daily challenges of young black individuals and the concerns of the African American community as a whole.

## **2. From Slavery to Black Lives Matter**

### **2.1. Historical Background**

African American history, from the dying days of slavery to the present, is marked by numerous fights for racial equality; indeed, these often evoke a certain sensation of *déjà vu*. Hence, as the writer Jesmyn Ward states in the introduction of her anthology *The Fire This Time*, when talking about the recent BLM movement, one must necessarily take into consideration “how inextricably interwoven the past is in the present, how heavily that past bears on the future; we cannot talk about black lives mattering or police brutality without reckoning with the very foundation of this country” (9). However, as the scope of this thesis does not allow for a full recount of all the remarkable efforts of the black community contributing to racial equality, this

chapter summarizes only some of the most defining moments of black America in the twentieth century.

### **2.1.1. “Separate but equal”: The Beginning of the 20th Century**

Following the abolition of slavery, the turn of the twentieth century was associated with a renewed hope of prosperity for all people. However, African Americans soon had to realize that the new century brought no fewer difficulties than the one before – it was marked by racial discrimination, scarcity of employment opportunities, and unequal rights between black and white. African Americans still had to endure violence inflicted upon them by white citizens with violent manifestations against black people being common reactions to the latter’s endeavors to obtain equal rights (Franklin 427-31). Additionally, a large number of black people continued to be lynched as a means of punishment, oftentimes because of alleged black-on-white rape. However, a recent report released by the Equal Justice Initiative found out that many African Americans were lynched albeit not being convicted of any crime. Between 1877 and 1950, at least 4,084 black individuals became victims of lynching in a dozen Southern states (EJI). As early as 1903, this pervasive discrimination led W. E. B. Du Bois to anticipate that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (1). The Southern states adopted multiple new segregation laws, known as the Jim Crow laws, which enforced the separation of blacks and whites in hospitals, schools, public transports, and in various other situations of life, whilst concurrently deepening financial inequality as more money was spent on facilities for white people than on those for black people (Sitkoff 5-6).

Driven by a search for better opportunities, many African Americans moved to the cities, where employment opportunities were better but still not enough for the high number of people living in urban areas. The rise of the Black community in cities fueled white citizens’ determination to racially segregate within the city, creating white blocks and black blocks. Accordingly, the first laws were passed by Louisville, Baltimore, Richmond, and Atlanta in 1912 and 1913 (Franklin 427-32). Thus, laws enacted at the beginning of the twentieth century further enforced the legal edifice of Jim Crow and bolstered the belief in white supremacy, especially in the South (Sitkoff 5).

As a consequence, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909, which set up a legal defense for people of color and challenged Jim Crow laws by advocating for the abolition of racial segregation and for equal education opportunities (Franklin 430). Although its goals were barely met and the Southern racial policies barely altered during the first quarter of the century, gradual change in the North raised

hopes. Contrary to the South, black Americans in the North were allowed to vote, and the first African American, Oscar de Priest, was elected to Congress in 1928. Moreover, the contemporaneous literary and artistic Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s spurred the pride of African Americans and led to the image of what Alain Locke called “The New Negro”: a self-confident and intellectual individual determined to fight for his or her rights (see Locke). However, change particularly occurred after the Second World War when membership in the NAACP multiplied almost ten times (Sitkoff 11) and especially when the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum in the 1950s (18).

Having long been deprived of (equal) educational opportunities, African Americans fiercely believed in education as epitomizing freedom and autonomy. Racial segregation within schools was legally upheld in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896, which perceived segregation as legal as long as the accommodations provided for black people were equal to those of whites, a principle that was known as “separate but equal” (Dudley 61). Despite this dogma, the Southern schools for black students experienced particular hardship during the Great Depression as money was cut back first at black people’s schools. Thus, separate institutions strongly supported the idea of white supremacy and black inferiority in the South (Franklin 536-37).

In 1950, the NAACP challenged *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, claiming that deteriorated facilities did not correspond to the principle of “separate but equal” and that segregation in itself was discriminatory (Weisbrot 8). In May 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the United States Supreme Court declared segregated public schools as unconstitutional and promised equal educational opportunities for all (Dudley 61). This landmark decision represents a crucial cornerstone in the struggle against Jim Crow laws. However, as was so often the case, black resistance collided with white rage. As the Southern white citizens’ fear of “race mixing” was still deeply anchored, they looked for ways to circumvent the new ruling by trying to delay the implementation of desegregation (62). As a matter of fact, the NAACP’s demand for instant school desegregation was rejected by the justices at the end of May 1955, and they opted for a slow implementation instead (Sitkoff 23). Thus, the white adamant stance against desegregation led to the black community’s increasing resistance by means of sit-ins, marches, protests, and boycotts.

### **2.1.2. Resistance: Bus Boycotts, Sit-ins, and Freedom Rides**

On the first of December 1955, the seamstress Rosa Parks challenged the segregation laws and refused to give up her bus seat to a white person in Montgomery, Alabama. Although she was

arrested for violating the city law that required black people to leave the front seats of the bus free for white passengers, her defiance inspired more African Americans to resist Jim Crow laws (Sitkoff 37-38). Thus, on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 90 percent of the African Americans who usually took the busses refused to ride them until segregation ended. The boycotts were especially powerful as businesses depended principally on the black customers, whose sudden refusal to take public transports was immediately felt by the merchants. This incident marked the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott, which would last for 381 days, drawing attention to racial injustices (40).

The Montgomery bus boycott was not only the first large-scale mass protest against segregation, it also led to the young pastor Martin Luther King, Jr. emerging as the movement's leader. He staunchly believed in the power of nonviolent activism, hoping to foster understanding for the prevailing inhuman situation of black people living in the United States (Ogbar 41-42). For King, the strategy of nonviolence signified empowerment for all American citizens. By weakening white people's readiness to fight back with violence, it also contributed to their increasing sense of guilt and directly confronted them with the miserable situation of African Americans. Simultaneously, it encouraged the black community to thwart white supremacist views imposed upon them and to resist peacefully but collectively (Sitkoff 54-55). Consequently, King envisioned nonviolence to "save the white man as well as the Negro" (*Chaos* 61).

The bus boycott inspired more peaceful protests in various public facilities. In 1960, four African American students took seats at a lunch counter in Greensboro which were assigned to "white only." Although the young protesters were not served and asked to leave, they stayed seated until the store closed. As word spread across town, more African Americans returned the next morning and over 300 black and white people joined the sit-ins by the end of the week. Greensboro encouraged further sit-ins in the South, resulting in more than 70,000 people who had participated in sit-ins by August 1961 (Sitkoff 61-64). While change came only sporadically, more and more facilities were desegregated as a consequence of the sit-ins. Moreover, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization of young activists decisive in the Civil Rights Movement, emerged out of the protests (85).

In 1960, the Supreme Court extended its desegregation ruling in *Boynton v. Virginia* to include bus terminals and other facilities associated with interstate travel as well. In March 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) decided to test the ruling and expose existing discrimination in the South (88-89). Thus, an interracial group of eight blacks and eight whites first met in Washington, D.C., to be trained on tactics of nonviolence and then took the bus

from Washington, D.C., to their final destination New Orleans, Louisiana, on May 4. Their strategy was to test their new rights that formerly fell under segregation laws. While the blacks occupied the seats in the front, the whites sat in the back. At the bus stops, black riders used the whites-only facilities and vice versa. The further South they went, the more publicity they gained and the more resentment from white citizens they felt. In Anniston, Alabama, one of their two buses was awaited by an angry mob, who, armed with iron bars, tire chains, and blackjacks, broke windows and ultimately threw an incendiary bomb inside the bus. While everybody could exit the vehicle in time, the mob continued to attack the exiting passengers. As another proof of the prevailing racial inequality, hospitals refused to treat the injured riders until the staff of the hospital was told to give them medical treatment by authorities. The second bus encountered similar violence in Birmingham, where several activists were severely injured by another angry white mob. In both cases, the police responded suspiciously late to the attacks although they had been warned of potential violent conflict. Consequently, the CORE decided to abandon the rides and take a flight to their intended destination, New Orleans, arranged by the department of justice (90-93).

However, the decision of CORE did not discourage the Nashville SNCC to continue the Freedom Rides. As they did not want to allow violence to overcome them, they were determined to start a new wave of Freedom Rides and decided to travel from Nashville to Birmingham, from where they planned to take the bus to Montgomery. Upon their arrival in Birmingham, the police awaited them and put them into prison. After a hunger strike, they were released and managed to reach Birmingham to board the bus for Montgomery. When they reached the bus terminal, they were again awaited by a violent mob, which was able to beat them unhindered, without a single police officer in sight (93-95). Despite the severe beatings the activists had to endure, their battle turned out to be successful. At the end of 1962, signs separating “White” and “Colored” had to be removed, which showed that change was indeed possible also in the South (100).

### **2.1.3. Marches for Equality**

However, every step toward equality immediately met with opposition from Southern white citizens and further incited racial violence. As Birmingham, Alabama, was one of the most segregated and racially violent cities in the U.S., Martin Luther King, Jr. decided to make the city the protesters’ next target in April 1963 (Capek 43). The goal of the protests was to put pressure on the city still holding on to Jim Crow laws despite of the U.S. Justice Department’s orders to end segregation. However, many activists, among them King, were arrested after a

few days of protesting (45). As people increasingly feared to lose their jobs due to arrests, the campaign began to falter. Consequently, the activists decided to involve children as they could not lose any jobs. On May 2, what became known as the “children’s crusade” began and more than 1,000 black children marched through downtown Birmingham. As they were arrested by the police, more young protesters arrived. By the end of the day, 959 children were put in Birmingham’s jails. As the nonviolent demonstrations continued, they were soon stopped by violent police attacking and arresting the children (46-48). However, racial riots continued as the Ku Klux Klan bombed King’s hotel and his brother’s house (51). Consequently, the widespread outrage moved President Kennedy to take action. On June 11, he sent a new civil rights bill to congress, which should finally ensure equal educational opportunities and the end of segregation in public facilities (Kallen 33).

In order to express the urgency of the bill and to demonstrate their unity, more than 200,000 black and white people gathered near the Lincoln Memorial for the March on Washington for Jobs and Economic Freedom on August 28. The peaceful demonstration drew attention to poverty and black unemployment. It served as a platform to various speakers and performers. On this day, Martin Luther King, Jr. held his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he spread optimism and unity (Levy 22-23).

However, the first weeks after the powerful march on Washington did not look very promising. The president’s bill was long debated and blocked by Southern senators. Moreover, a bomb attack on a Birmingham church that killed four black girls and President John F. Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, further contributed to a dismal climate (23-24). Thus, Kennedy’s successor President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the passage of the civil rights bill one of his highest priorities, such that it was finally signed on June 2, 1964 (Capek 59). The Civil Rights Act constituted a crucial federal legislation for racial justice. It ended most of the still existing Jim Crow laws as it made discrimination of people because of race illegal and compelled schools to desegregate (Levy 24).

While the new law significantly ameliorated the legal status of African Americans, it did nothing to protect their voting rights, which were often still denied in the South. King and the SCLC selected Selma, Alabama, as their target city for their fight for voting rights because of its reputation as a racist city denying black residents, who made up for the majority of the citizens, their right to vote (26). Thus, peaceful protests started in January with the hope to raise attention to the prevailing denials of voting rights and the ultimate goal to outlaw discriminatory voter registration requirements (Capek 68). What began as a peaceful march in January, led over 2,000 protesters into jail by the end of the month (Sitkoff 175). After the tragic shooting



of a peaceful black protester in February, the SCLC decided to stage a march from Selma to Montgomery. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, 600 supporters of the Civil Rights Movement walked to Montgomery. However, as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were stopped and attacked by authorities. As the brutal scenes spread the public news in the United States, the day became known as “Bloody Sunday.” Despite the federal judge’s order against marches, King decided not to give in to violence and called for a second march on March 9. He led his group to the Pettus Bridge but turned back as he did not intend to violate the federal court’s order (Levy 27). On March 15, President Johnson finally asked the Congress to the passage of a voting rights bill. The third march was launched on March 21 when thousands of civil rights activists walked to Selma, this time with protection of guards, ordered by President Johnson. Finally, on August 6, 1965, the president signed the Voting Rights Act into law. Many Americans now believed peace to finally be restored as the supposedly last remnants of Jim Crow were annihilated with the signing of the Voting Rights Act (28).

#### **2.1.4. Black Power**

The fact that despite the new laws African Americans still did not feel they were provided with the same opportunities as white Americans was felt only five days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, when the destructive Watts riots erupted in a Los Angeles ghetto (Sitkoff 185). As the nonviolent era of the Civil Rights Movement came to an end, new rage sprouted from the shortcomings of the former movement, which were mostly Northern blacks from poor neighborhoods (Levy 29). By the end of 1968, 250 black Americans had died and 50,000 had been arrested in different American cities in the upheaval of the years following the Civil Rights Movement (Sitkoff 185).

As a result of disagreements among African American civil rights organizations and growing doubt over the effectiveness of King’s nonviolent and Christian strategy, new organizations emerged, which often drew on Malcolm X’ fiery rhetoric as inspiration (Riches 89-93). In June 1966, Stokely Carmichael of the SNCC introduced the slogan “Black Power.” As he explains in his pamphlet, contrary to the Civil Rights Movement, which only used “words whites want to hear” (52), the new movement wanted to address the black community directly so that “[f]or once, black people are going to use the words they want to use.” Black Power intended to instill black pride and overcome the idea of white supremacy and black inferiority. Rather than aiming at integration, “a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy” (54), Black Power wanted to build their own schools and institutions so that children had black role models to identify with (54-56). Between 1966 and 1976, various programs and organizations

developed under the Black Power ideology. Although the organizations were numerous and had differing views, they all shared the demand for self-determination and an awareness of “black nationality” (Diouf and Woodard VIII). They drew on black nationalism in the sense that it intended to promote black group consciousness and the belief that African Americans have the power to create autonomous institutions without the help of white people (Ogbar 3).

One of the most influential groups was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP), originally founded to combat police violence by the two students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California, in October 1966. Due to their openly displayed weapons and fiery rhetoric, the Black Panthers were often negatively portrayed in the media. However, they stood for good causes, aimed at drawing attention to and easing the plight of poor blacks, offered free breakfast programs for students and free health clinics (Sitkoff 204). They developed a Ten Points Program, first released in 1967, in which they describe their demands, entitled “What We Want,” and outline their philosophical beliefs in “What We Believe.” They enlisted employment, housing, education, and a fair justice system as their priority demands (University of Northern Iowa 16-17).

Their bold actions attracted the police’s wrath and led to numerous Black Panthers being arrested or killed (Levy 30). The two Black Panther activists Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were shot dead by police in their sleep (Diouf and Woodard XII). As arrests of African Americans rose exponentially, Black Power activists commonly claimed the criminal justice system to be a central player of racism and racial inequality. Although a decreasing number of inmates was held in American prisons during the 1960s, colored people’s incarceration rate rose disproportionally compared to whites. Thus, Black Power stood up for a fair justice system. In the BPP’s Ten Point Program of 1968, the members demanded the “immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people,” “freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails,” and “all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black communities” (University of Northern Iowa 16-17). Hence, the BPP became known for its demands for black inmates’ freedom and its campaigns waged for the liberation of members from prison. One such case concerned the BPP’s co-founder Huey P. Newton, who was arrested on October 28, 1967, for killing a police officer. When he faced the death penalty, the “Free Huey” campaign was launched and attracted a high amount of media attention. Thousands of people rallied on the streets to demand Huey’s freedom but also to expose the United States’ racially biased justice system. Convicted of manslaughter in 1968, his sentence was overturned in 1970 (Berger 76-77). Another case that garnered international attention was the conviction of Angela Davis, who

was charged with providing guns used in an attempt to free prisoners. After she went underground for two months, she spent 16 months in pre-trial detention. The world-wide campaign for her freedom finally led to her acquittal in 1972 (85).

As more and more Black Power activists were incarcerated, the prison became the staging ground for their fight against racial oppression. Some joined organizations of the movement only after the arrest and tried to bring about change from within the prison walls (71). Inspired by Malcolm X, who described his time in prison in his autobiography *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and perceived his sentence as a proof of racism that systematically incarcerated black Americans, Black Power activists challenged America's prison system. They formed study groups, attempted several escapes, and wrote newspapers (72-73). Prison rebellions flared up at the end of the 1960s, mounting up to 48 uprisings in 1972 alone. George Jackson, who was arrested for robbery at the age of 18 in 1960, became one of the most influential political prisoners (83). When Jackson was killed by guards in August 1971, prisoners tried to continue his fight for Black Power. Jackson's death was followed by the Attica uprising, in which inmates took over the prison to draw attention to their political demands, namely to improve the quality of life in prison. However, the New York governor Nelson Rockefeller refused negotiations and ordered the recapture of the prison, which resulted in the killing of 29 prisoners and ten guards. Consequently, conditions in prison became more severe: solitary confinement hampered the exchange between political prisoners and the restriction of prison libraries and writing programs aimed to curtail any rebellious thoughts (84-86). The Attica uprising was one of the first markers of America's prison system that led to a shift in law enforcement. The state-led assault on prisoners served as a way to impose authority on those people who had caused disturbances in numerous rebellions across the country before being incarcerated (Taylor 67).

Thus, public attention of Black Power and black prisoners had dwindled by 1980. Nevertheless, the conditions of African Americans had barely been ameliorated. The number of activists' and poor black people's arrests continued to grow and several members of BPP stayed behind the prison walls until their deaths. However, the Black Power movement marked only the beginning of the United States' mass incarceration (Berger 86).

The Civil Rights Movement and Black Power significantly transformed the way black Americans both saw and continue to see themselves as they instilled a sense of pride and power in African Americans. The contemporary BLM movement continues to draw inspiration from former activists in an ongoing struggle for freedom. As becomes apparent when evoking

African Americans' situation in the U.S. of the past decade, their way to freedom is complex and tortuous. The deeply ingrained racism has still not been overcome; it has simply found more subtle, insidious manifestations. Systemic racism persists in various areas of American public life, as for instance the court system.

## **2.2. Mass Incarceration in the United States**

In the book *The New Jim Crow*, published in 2010, the legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues that Jim Crow is still a present reality in the United States' justice system. To explain the systematic overimprisonment of black people, she refers to the criminal justice system as a "racial caste system" in the sense that it "denote[s] a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom" (12). While the United States does not have a caste system in the legal sense, the author uses this notion to demonstrate how mass incarceration works. In her description, mass incarceration "refers not only to the criminal justice system but also to the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison" (13). According to Alexander, mass incarceration represents "the new Jim Crow": just as the reality of black people in the Southern states after the abolition of slavery was marked by racist laws, African American's current reality is still centered around discrimination, racism, and institutionalization.

The focus on law enforcement can be traced back to "law and order" politics, which first emerged in the late 1950s. As activists of the Civil Rights Movement increasingly raised their voices against racial discrimination, Southern governors associated them with criminals and lawbreakers. Thus, the Civil Rights Movement was depicted as indicative of a disruption to the country's law and order (40). Blackness was soon seen as synonymous with criminality. As the Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael observed in his aforementioned pamphlet, "[o]nce again, responsibility is shifted from the oppressor to the oppressed" (55). As crime rates grew steadily and riots broke out in the 1960s, the focus shifted from racial inequality to crime. With growing vehemence, politicians called for "law and order" and harsher sentences for lawbreakers, targeting mainly the black population (Alexander 41).

The beginning of the phenomenon we today call mass incarceration is commonly charted in the 1970s, when the law and order politics fueled a meteoric rise in prison admissions (Taylor 66). During the presidential race in 1968, President Richard Nixon successfully took advantage of the American citizens' burgeoning fear of crime. "Law and order" became the

catchphrase of his campaign, dedicating 17 speeches merely to this topic (Weaver 259). Instead of mentioning poverty as a reason for the rise in crime rates, he strategically linked racial conflict and lawlessness: “It’s all about law and order and the damn Negro-Puerto Rican groups out there” (Nixon qtd. in Carter 348). The success of his law and order rhetoric was partly due to his use of the citizens’ emotions. He articulated white fears of riots and criminality, which were typically associated with black people, and pledged to restore control (Taylor 55-56). Moreover, Nixon used a colorblind rhetoric to turn the focus away from the racial discrimination still existent in the public sector. Instead, he highlighted each citizen’s “freedom of choice” to counter the idea of institutional racism and put the blame on individuals themselves. The absence of race in his speeches indicated that effects of the past related to discrimination were ignored and existing racial discrimination was not perceived as contributing to crime and poverty anymore (63-72).

The War on Drugs contributed substantially to the exponential rise of incarceration rates under the presidency of Ronald Reagan. While Nixon had already declared illegal drugs “public enemy number one” (qtd. in Alexander 48) during his presidency, only in 1982 did Reagan implement the War on Drugs. Consequently, incarceration rates skyrocketed, and the United States grew to accommodate the world’s largest prison population. Sentences for drug-related offences became harsher and longer, particularly for crack cocaine, which mainly circulated in black neighborhoods (Mauer and King 7; 21).<sup>2</sup> While fewer than 200,000 prisoners were held behind bars in 1970 (The Sentencing Project 1), America’s prisons have more than 2.3 million inmates today (Wagner and Rabuy). Convictions for drug abuse were the major cause of the exponential rise in prison admissions: between 1985 and 2005, drug arrests have tripled to a record of 1.8 million arrests in 2005 (Mauer and King 2).

The War on Drugs particularly affected people living in low-income neighborhoods, who were often left jobless due to the impact of deindustrialization. Thus, as a result of poor education, few employment opportunities, and scarce treatment for addiction, poor communities were more vulnerable to the government’s new policy (Alexander 50-51). Incarceration rates of people from those areas soared as drug law enforcement targeted inner city areas and emphasized punishment, meanwhile neglecting treatments for drug addicts (Mauer and King 19). Angela Davis, in her book *Are prisons obsolete?*, questioned

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<sup>2</sup> Crack only began to emerge in poor black neighborhoods in 1985, after the launching of the War on Drugs (Alexander 51). This fueled speculations about the War on Drugs as a strategic plan to exacerbate the plight of poor African Americans. In 1998, the CIA admitted that they were involved in the drug trafficking of Nicaraguan guerilla armies, who were smuggling illegal drugs in the United States. Those drugs then landed in inner-city black neighborhoods (6; Anderson 124-129; Schou). Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence concerning the CIA’s involvement, and the matter remains controversial and highly debated in the United States.

imprisonment as a viable solution to societal issues: “The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract side into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers” (16). Prisons, she elaborates, are the “black hole” that makes the problems invisible but does nothing to ameliorate the situation of those concerned.

The consequences of the War on Drugs are still felt today. Although rates of drug use are similar among whites and African Americans, the latter represent 37% of the people arrested for drug abuse and 56% of those incarcerated for drug conviction (Mauer and King 20). Despite composing a mere 13% of the United States’ population (USCB), black people represent about 35% of the prison population. Regardless of the nature of the crime, African American men are six times more likely to be put into prison than white men (The Sentencing Project 5).<sup>3</sup>

Having once entered the criminal justice system, circumstances are particularly difficult for poor people. Those who cannot afford an attorney are obliged to defend themselves or are not granted any trials at all (Alexander 59). Moreover, once criminals are freed from prison, they are often stripped of many basic human rights: those released on parole can be stopped and searched by the police for no particular reason, and a wrong move can have dramatic consequences. Furthermore, they are denied their voting rights. Given these circumstances, Alexander draws a parallel to African Americans’ situation at the beginning of the century: “Today a criminal freed from prison has scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a freed slave or black person living ‘free’ in Mississippi at the height of Jim Crow” (141). Hence, the repercussions of mass incarceration extend the bars of prison and have a far-reaching impact on the criminals’ future life “in freedom,” a situation reminiscent of the problems that emerged in the wake of the abolition of slavery.

In 2018, the United States once again has a president who panders to law enforcement, resorting to a strikingly similar rhetoric to Nixon’s law and order and Reagan’s War on Drugs. Akin to the public climate at the time of Nixon’s election, that of 2016 was marked by a fear of (imagined) threats against the United States (crime, war, terrorism, immigrants). Thus, in his presidential campaign of 2016, Donald Trump articulated American citizens’ fears and pledged to be the “law and order candidate” in his acceptance speech, echoing Nixon’s 1968 campaign.

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that women are at least equally affected by the surge of arrests: although there are more men held in prison than women, the incarceration rates of women have grown much faster than those of men. Between 1978 and 2015, women’s state prison populations have grown twice as fast as those of men, to over nine times the size of the 1978 number. This makes them the fastest-growing group of the incarceration population (Sawyer).

Hinting at the BLM movement, Trump expressed his support of severe punishment: “An attack on law enforcement is an attack on all Americans” (qtd. in Roberts and Jacobs). Moreover, just like President Reagan, who came up with the slogan “Let’s Make America Great Again” (Tumulty) in his 1980 campaign and propelled unprecedented rates in incarceration through the War on Drugs, President Trump, who trademarked the same slogan Reagan used for his political actions, now calls for the sentencing of drug dealers to death. As President Trump sees “toughness” (qtd. in Holpuch, Glenza, and Jacobs) as the only way to combat drug problems and is a blatant advocate of law and order, the problem of mass incarceration will likely remain a major issue in the near future.

### **2.3. Police Brutality and the Representation of the Black Body**

But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful [...]. (Coates, *World* 71)

This quote from *Between the World and Me* by the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates describes parts of the challenges of growing up black in a white-dominated society. The book is a letter addressed to the author’s adolescent son and represents what the black community refers to as “the talk”: a conversation between parents and children of color that prepares the latter for a world that will treat them differently because of their skin color. The underlying message parents want to convey is “one of self-awareness: the people you encounter, especially the police, are probably willing to break your body, if only because they subconsciously view you not only as less than, but also as a threat” (Lowery). Thus, “the talk” prepares black children to be aware of their black bodies, especially when confronted with the police, as in too many cases a wrong move has not only already led to fatal killings of innocent black individuals by police officers but also to the black body being posthumously accused of his or her own death.

The term police brutality as it is employed here refers to “the use of excessive physical force or verbal assault and psychological intimidation” (Walker 579) by police officers. Considering the riots of the 1960s, which involved harsh confrontations with law enforcement officers, police violence in the United States is not a new phenomenon. However, with the proliferation of social media, increasing attention has been drawn to killings of unarmed black

people by law enforcement officers in the recent years. And yet, due to a lack of official data, accounts of those killings are sparse or incomplete.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to provide more comprehensive data on police brutality, *The Guardian* launched the project “The Counted” in 2015, a chronicle of killings by police based on reports, news outlets, and crowdsourced information. According to their analysis, 1,146 people were killed by police officers in 2015. Those findings also shed light on the racial dimension of police violence. Black people, and especially young black men between the ages of 15 and 34, are the group most concerned by excessive police force (The Counted). The latter are nine times more likely to be killed by the police than other Americans (Swaine et al.).<sup>5</sup> The stop-and-frisk policy that is applied by the police officers also affects a disproportionate number of African Americans: the vast majority of pedestrian stops by the police concerns racial minorities. Between 2004 and 2012, 83% of those stopped in New York were African Americans or Hispanics (Bergner). This shows that the question of who is stopped and perceived as a danger by the police is highly influenced by race.

The reasons why blacks are the main target of police brutality are varied. Smiley and Fakunle explain how the media contributed to the image of the criminal black person, exploiting the negative connotations of the word “brute” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and “thug” today (353). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the image of the black brute was used to demonize African Americans, depict them as naturally inferior and violent, and justify brutal killings by whites such as lynching (354-56). Today, the term thug has replaced brute and frequently occurs in discussions about black victims of police violence. Thug, as it is used in the media, refers to black men or boys “who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America” (351). The word thug connotes criminalization and thereby shifts the blame from the perpetrator to the victim (357). However, it should be noted that the meaning of thug, similar to the N-word, has changed over time and has a slightly different connotation when used by black people: “Thug in the black community, for about the past 25 to 30 years, has also meant ruffian, but there is a tinge of affection” (McWhorter qtd. in Block). The fact that the word thug is often employed as a means to emphasize a black individual’s criminal background shows how certain terms are defined by the (white) media. The minority is given hardly any chance of redefining themselves. The American journalist Howard W. French mentions this problem in an article in *The*

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<sup>4</sup> One example of statistics on excessive force by law enforcement officers is provided by the FBI’s data on “justifiable homicides” by police officers. “Justifiable homicide” is defined as “[t]he killing of a felon by a peace officer in the line of duty” and “[t]he killing of a felon, during the commission of a felony, by a private citizen.” In the FBI’s 2015 report, 442 individuals who were “justifiably killed” by officers are mentioned (FBI). However, it is neither closely defined what the word “justifiable” refers to, nor are instances of non-justified killings included.



*Guardian*, claiming that “the overwhelming whiteness of the media strongly but silently conditions how Americans understand their own country and the rest of the world.” This phenomenon is common throughout black history and was also addressed by recognizable black writers, as for instance Audre Lorde: “For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment” (*Surface* 45).

Smiley and Fakunle analyzed media responses to the deaths of six unarmed black males by police officers and the portrayal of the victims. Racism manifested itself more implicitly, in the form of microaggressions: racist ideology that is conveyed without explicitly talking about race (560). Newspapers often centered attention on the victims’ physical appearances, past criminal felonies, or individual behavior. For instance, Eric Garner, who was choked to death, was frequently referred to as the “350-pound man,” thus implying that his death was due to his obesity and not police brutality, and Michael Brown’s story was often accompanied by the story of his robbery of a convenience store (361-65). The main message is thereby shifted from the black people’s tragic deaths caused by police officers to the victim’s background, making it seem as if they are to blame themselves and turning them posthumously into thugs. As mentioned by Coates, black individuals are then not only held accountable for their own deaths, but also for the mistakes made by powerful groups of people such as police officers. The unarmed black individuals’ deaths are rationalized, and their lives are devalued. Consequently, the media triggers “negative misconceptions that will be unconsciously and unjustifiably attached to these individuals” (367). Thus, the negative media portrayal of black people also contributes to law enforcement officers’ often unconscious perception of black men as more malign (357).

The image of black people as thugs can also be explained by the concept of the “white gaze.” In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, George Yancy explores this concept from various perspectives and defines the white gaze as a hegemonic way of seeing that

function[s] to objectify the Black body as an entity that is to be feared, disciplined, and relegated to those marginalized, imprisoned, and segregated spaces that restrict Black bodies from “disturbing” the tranquility of white life, white comfort, white embodiment, and white being. (12)

In order to illustrate the relation between blackness and whiteness, he refers to Frantz Fanon, who asserts that “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (90). Thus, the meaning of blackness is constructed in relation to whiteness, which constitutes “the transcendental norm” (Yancy 13). Anything that deviates from the white norm

is regarded as different. In this sense, history has shown that the black body has long been regarded as the opposite of the white body and has linked it to negative connotations such as inferiority, monstrosity, and criminality. The white gaze automatically condemns the black body before it commits a crime: “The reality is that I find myself within a normative space, a historically structured and *structuring* space, through which I am ‘seen’ and judged guilty a priori” (22). The white gaze has the power to shape the public perception of a whole community of black people in a negative way and thereby determines not only how black individuals are seen but also how black individuals interact in a white-dominated world. Consequently, the white gaze “traps black people in white imaginations” (Grant).

Judith Butler’s analysis of the Rodney King beating<sup>6</sup> provides valuable insights into the construction of the black body as dangerous within the white imaginary. As she explains, the fact that the jury perceived King’s video, which clearly “shows a man being brutally beaten” (*Reading* 15), as a confirmation of him threatening the police shows that there are different ways of “seeing” (16). Instead of being perceived as the object of violence, he is made into the “agency of violence.” The associations of danger and threat are always already circumscribed to the black body, prior to any gestures it might make. This image is produced within the white imaginary, “through the saturation and schematization of that field with the inverted projections of white paranoia.” Thus, in the case of schematic racism, the black body is always the source of danger and his status as a threat is justified by rearranging “the circumstances to fit the conclusion” (18). As Yancy concludes, “[m]y Blackness is sufficient evidence of my brutality” (37).

Yancy further explains white people’s perception of black people as threat and their racist reactions as “habits of the body.” Their actions happen unconsciously, as a form of “blindness [...] embedded within [their] encrusted bodily ways of engaging-in-the-world.” This then acts as a potential explanation for police officers’ brutal reactions when confronted with black individuals. Racist actions are often motivated by internalized perceptions of a group of people that are not always individual but also cultural. Thus, people often do “not realize the subtle, habitual performances that [they] enact[ ] in order to sustain the socially constructed nature of [their] gaze, and, hence, to continue to perpetuate the distortion of [the] Black body as criminal” (38).

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<sup>6</sup> The African American Rodney King was brutally beaten by four police officers in Los Angeles in 1991. Afterwards, a videotape showing the beating was released. The acquittal of King’s assailants provoked outrage among African Americans and sparked the 1992 Los Angeles riots (see Carroll).

However, there are possibilities to provide different ways of seeing beyond this prevalent gaze. In particular, rap songs and literature – as will be shown in the book analyses – are powerful tools that allow minority communities to provide alternative perspectives. In this way, they assume the power to challenge prevalent images of people of color and to articulate themselves. As the writer Toni Morrison puts it: “Our lives have no meaning, no depth without the white gaze. And I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books” (qtd. in Grant).

## **2.4. The Beginning of a New Movement: Black Lives Matter**

If the problem of the twentieth century was, in W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous words, ‘the problem of the color line,’ then the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of colorblindness, the refusal to acknowledge the causes and consequences of enduring racial stratification. (Murakawa, qtd. in Taylor 51)

With the election of the United States’ first black president Barack Obama in 2008, the US has often been referred to as a “colorblind” and “post-racial” society (Taylor 2). The president has been heralded as the proof that in the United States, the American dream can come true to anyone with aspiration and endeavor. While the symbolic value of Obama’s presidency for the black community needs to be pointed out, the idea of colorblindness obscures the fact that, for many Americans, what Malcolm X once described as an “American nightmare” is still a reality hard, if not impossible, to overcome: unemployment, substandard housing, and police brutality are their daily realities (Taylor 2-4). It therefore came as a surprise for some that the United States was rocked by mass protests by people of color at a time when America was led by a black president. However, the success of a few African Americans does not necessarily mean progress for the whole community. Instead, it has given rise to a physical vulnerability shared by black people (Cherry).

With the proliferation of social media, increasing attention has been drawn to the killings of people of color by mostly white law enforcement officers in the past years. Thus, the case of the unarmed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot in the streets by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmermann due to his supposedly suspicious behavior, and whose killer was eventually acquitted of all charges, was no exception (CNN Library). However, when Zimmermann’s verdict was announced on July 13, 2013, Alicia Garza’s outrage on her Facebook page sparked multiple responses: “I continue to be surprised at how

little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life. black people, I will NEVER give up on us. NEVER” (qtd. in Khan-Cullors and Bandele 180). Patrisse Khan-Cullors’ answer marked the beginning of a new movement: “#BlackLivesMatter.”

In the wake of Zimmermann’s acquittal, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi agreed to build a political project that should transcend their social media walls.<sup>7</sup> They decided to turn the hashtag into a movement as they helped organize marches and protests and drew up a list of demands in order to bring attention to the cascading effects of institutional racism on the black community (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 196-98). In her memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist*, Khan-Cullors explains what led to the current situation of black people and her motivation behind creating a movement as follows:

We are a forgotten generation. Worse, we are a generation that has been written off. We’ve been written off by the drug war. We’ve been written off by the war on gangs. We’ve been written off by mass incarceration and criminalization. [...] We care about human rights and common decency. So there is no other place for me to be but here, where I can continue to help bring that into existence. (248-49)

The turning point of BLM that triggered the proliferation of the hashtag came in the summer of 2014, when the killings of two unarmed black men by law enforcement officers sparked unrest among the black community. On July 17, Eric Garner was choked to death by a police officer in Staten Island while repeating the phrase “I can’t breathe” (Baker, Goodman, and Mueller). Less than a month later, on August 9, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was stopped and shot by the police officer Darren Wilson as he walked down the street with a friend in Ferguson, Missouri (Chang 86). Although the killings of the two black men by law enforcement officers were no exception, Brown’s case would eventually be the breaking point for massive protests that spread across the United States in the wake of his death. As Taylor observes, “[p]erhaps it was the inhumanity of the police leaving Brown’s body to fester in the hot summer sun for four and a half hours after killing him” (153) that awakened thousands of people across the United States to take action against factors that contribute to the fragility of black life. The same day Michael Brown was killed, a fast-growing group of people gathered in Ferguson to protest against police violence, echoing Brown’s supposedly last words of defense “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” (Chang 91-94). As the protests continued, Ferguson raised national as well as international media attention and the hashtags #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter spurred the

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<sup>7</sup> All three women have already been involved in activism as community organizers and as writers or artists before BLM: Garza is a community activist and editorial writer; Khan-Cullors works as a community organizer, artist, and writer; and Tometi is the Executive Director of an organization for immigrant rights, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (Our Co-Founders).

story (106). Since then, #BlackLivesMatter has become an internationally recognizable social media hashtag.<sup>8</sup>

Fueled by their determination to build collective power, the three co-founders soon took #BlackLivesMatter to the streets. At the end of August, national rides to Ferguson were organized by BLM activists, called Black Life Matters Ride, “the Freedom Ride of our generation” (qtd. in teleSUR) as explained by Khan-Cullors, evoking the first peaceful protests of the Civil Rights Movement. More than 600 people across the country gathered to join the movement and support protesters in Ferguson (Chang 111). They outlined a list of demands, including Darren Wilson’s immediate arrest, the demilitarization of police, and reinvestment in impoverished black communities (Ferguson Action). The racial injustice swamping the city was seen as symbolic for what was happening all over the United States: “We understood Ferguson was not an aberration, but in fact, a clear point of reference for what was happening to Black communities everywhere” (Herstory). The activists then began to build their infrastructure for the Black Lives Matter Global Network, which now counts more than 40 chapters worldwide. As explained on their website,

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.

Contrary to former black movements, BLM is thus not necessarily a demand for specific political rights but rather a claim for the humanity of black lives. This call for black humanity shapes the actions of the movement. Organization strategies of BLM include marches, human blockades of cars, interruptions at political rallies and speeches (Lartey). Khan-Cullors demonstrates that BLM addresses not only police brutality but also the daily situations in which black people are still given the feeling that their lives matter less than those of white people by claiming that “[w]e deserve [...] what so many others take for granted”: nutritious food (“healthy, organic and whole food”), substandard housing (“a shelter that is not a cage”), education, and love (199-200). Hence, while BLM has emerged as a response to state violence, it also draws attention to further issues of racial injustice that ought to matter: “We say that this is what we mean when we say Black Lives Matter” (201).

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<sup>8</sup> Social media was not only the starting point of BLM but also helped to connect the community, animate conversations about police brutality, and amplify people’s voices (Taylor 170). Apart from mobilizing individuals to take action, social media also serves as a documentary tool as pictures and videos that prove the reality of police violence circulate through social media channels in almost real time.

### 2.4.1. “Black Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter”

As is the case in most emancipation movements, and as can also be observed in recent feminist debates, the call for equality of a minority often provokes the outrage of a supremacist group that fears for its privileged status. The slogan “Black Lives Matter” has not been embraced by all people but has raised the question as to why the movement does not call for the appreciation of all lives. Moreover, one particular instance of retaliation, supported by President Trump, contends that “Blue Lives Matter,” in reference to the killings of police officers while on duty. Thus, the message behind “Black Lives Matter” has often been misunderstood. Hence, it is necessary to contextualize the movement and ask about the underlying reasons that have provoked the degradation of one life as opposed to another.

In order to understand the urgency of emphasizing black lives as opposed to others, one needs to address the question as to what has led to the perception that one life is more valuable than another. Clearly, human lives are supposed to be seen as valuable, implying a certain redundancy to the phrase “Black Lives Matter.” However, as Judith Butler explains, “the obvious has not yet been historically realized” (qtd. in Yancy and Butler 2). The instances when black people are treated unjustly, that is, as less valuable, than white people are manifold: police shootings, the criminal justice system, and rhetorical dehumanization within the media point to the continuous degradation of black lives.

BLM particularly calls attention to the police system, which has already taken away too many black lives, perceived not as human beings but as threats – simply for the color of their skin. They were seen as a threat despite being unarmed and lying on the ground, as in the case of Eric Garner. Grabbing a purse in an attempt to reach for identification papers as in the case of Philando Castile, or playing with a toy gun in a supermarket, as in the case of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice immediately triggers the assumption of the presence of a real gun. As a result, those black individuals are considered threats even though they do not threaten or carry weapons. That videos proving the innocence of so-called threats do nothing to confirm the guilt of those who, in the very eyes of the criminal justice system, have taken away African American lives shows that the obvious has not yet been recognized by everyone (Butler qtd. in Yancy and Butler 2-3).

Given the disproportionate number of black people exposed to police brutality, it is worth pondering whether all lives are considered equally valuable or human. In *Precarious Life*, Butler deals with questions of grief, vulnerability and bodies, and violence in America’s post-9/11 climate. Her thoughts resonate with the context of racial discrimination as she reflects upon the hierarchy of grief, asking whose lives count as “grievable.” She argues that grievability

is linked to a certain dominant frame that classifies people as human. Dehumanization occurs first on the level of discourse, conveying the image of certain lives to be less valuable. Butler's example of the obituary, which "functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed" (34), can also be applied to the media. It shapes the accepted image of who is considered human, who is not considered human, and who is not considered at all. Those who are represented in the media and granted a narrative have a chance to be humanized. However, narratives can also be twisted and used to dehumanize individuals. Referring to killed unarmed black people as "thugs" and spreading narratives of their lives as criminals in the media contributes to the dehumanization of the dead and conveys the message that their lives are not grievable. The media not only chooses which lives to glorify and which lives to vilify posthumously, it also chooses which lives to leave out of human discourse completely. This is then a sign that their lives do not qualify as lives and are thus unreal to the media and those influenced by the media (146-48).

Hence, dehumanization leads to the derealization of lives: "Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade? Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization" (33). Individuals who have been dehumanized are not perceived as "real" and their lives cease to matter. Those who are considered "unreal" are more vulnerable to violence as their lives have already been negated before. Not qualifying as humans, violence inflicted upon those who are "living in a state of suspension between life and death[ ] leaves a mark that is no mark" (36). Such derealization of lives can also be observed in the killings of black people by law enforcement officers in the United States. They have been dehumanized, classified as threats rather than real human beings, which is why the murder of innocent people of color in most of the cases does not have severe consequences for the police officers who have killed them. Hence, the innocent parties had already been rendered socially dead. Orlando Patterson described the concept of social death in 1982, explaining how during slavery, black people were desocialized and depersonalized, thus negated their social existence. Construing the black individual as "nonbeing" (38) allowed slave masters to treat black people as objects (38-39). Likewise, African Americans are often not seen as human beings today but are reduced to negative stereotypes, which makes it easier for police officers to justify their killing of unarmed blacks. BLM, then, attempts to antagonize the dehumanization and derealization of black individuals and instead tries to convey the real narrative of the dead.

The emphasis on "black" in "Black Lives Matter" also demonstrates the consequences of the negative connotations black skin provokes in some people, grouping a whole community of black people under the label of a "threat" or, as Khan-Cullors explains, a "terrorist":

I carry the memory of living under that terror – the terror of knowing that I, or any member of my family, could be killed with impunity – in my blood, my bones, in every step I take.

And yet I was called a terrorist. (8)

Although black people are haunted by the awareness of the terrorist label imposed upon them by white supremacy, this very same label costs hundreds of innocent black individuals their lives every year. Those associations unconsciously allow people who have internalized the belief that some lives matter more than others to decide over the latter's lives: "But those whose lives are not considered to matter, whose lives are perceived as a threat to the life that embodies white privilege can be destroyed in the name of that life" (Butler qtd. in Yancy and Butler 3). Hence, BLM is also about redirecting people's thinking and eliminating the ingrained stereotypes and implicit bias that together automatically associate blackness with criminality.

Moreover, "Black Lives Matter" challenges white privilege and attempts to disrupt the status quo. Replacing "Black" by "All" does not only lead the discussion back to whiteness but also ignores the plight of those who were all too often misheard or unheard: the black community. As Butler points out, whiteness cannot merely be reduced to the property of skin but entails social power and superiority over those who do not belong to the "norm." White privilege allows whiteness to "monopolize[ ] the power of destroying or demeaning bodies of color" (qtd. in Yancy and Butler 8) and clearly has far-reaching consequences, such as a legal system that decides whether the severity of punishment of a white and a black person who have committed the same crime differs. Thus, emphasizing "black" confronts Americans with the way black people are treated and forces change until "All Lives Matter" becomes a reality.

Hence, calling for "All Lives Matter" dismisses the fact that black lives are not included when talking about "all lives" as long as racial injustices and racial bias prevail. "All Lives Matter" can only be achieved when foregrounding those lives that seem to not matter right now (Butler qtd. in Yancy and Butler 6). As Garza puts it, "*When Black people get free, everybody gets free.*"

#### **2.4.2. The Herstory of Black Lives Matter**

Rekia Boyd, Tanisha Anderson, Yvette Smith, and Sandra Bland are only a few names of a long list of women who have been killed by police officers in the past years. And yet, their names go largely unspoken, their stories largely unnoticed. While the recent events of police shootings of black males are often covered in the media and have triggered national outrage, the reporting of fatally killed black women are rare. Implied is that gender saves women from



police violence. However, gender does not lessen female blacks' risk being targeted; it makes them invisible. Black women are also concerned by police violence and racial profiling, but their deaths often go unnoticed.<sup>9</sup> BLM attempts to refocus attention on the impact of police brutality on all Black individuals, including those on the margins.

In contrast to past movements of black people, BLM offers an inclusive approach to activism. The movement acknowledges differences within the Black community and the multidimensional experiences of people of color that work at multiple intersections. As black women have to face both racism and sexism, discourses that usually only respond to either antiracist or feminist issues, the interests of female African Americans are often neglected (Crenshaw 1241). This is even more true for those who experience discrimination on further fronts, as for example homosexuality or disabilities. Thus, the movement's understanding of Black lives includes everyone:

Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement. (Garza)

With three women at the forefront, BLM challenges the image of the traditionally male face of activism and instead “provides the ideological space to imagine a world without patriarchal imperatives that demand the disappearing of women's bodies” (Chatelain 6). The movement's inclusive approach is an effort to ensure that nobody is left behind.

However, BLM has often been criticized as being leaderless (Chatelain 6; Chatelain and Asoka 59-60). The reluctance to recognize female leadership is yet another sign that women are often rendered invisible and is reminiscent of past movements, in which women have been a substantial part of Black people's fight for freedom but have often been undermined (Chatelain and Asoka 60).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, co-founder Khan-Cullors illustrates the activists' challenges in being recognized as the leaders of BLM: “[I]t takes a long time for us to occur to most reporters in the mainstream. Living in a patriarchy means that the default inclination is to center men and their voices, not women and their work” (219). Although BLM distinguishes itself from past movements in the sense that it advocates the idea of participatory democracy, where decisions for the group are not made by one single leader only, it is not a disjointed movement without goals as it has sometimes been criticized (Chatelain 6).

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<sup>9</sup> The African American Policy Forum (AAPF) provides important information on racial discrimination against women and incidences of black women killed at the hands of police brutality. For more information see African American Policy Forum, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women*.

<sup>10</sup> Examples include Iba B. Wells and the Nicaragua movement, as well as Ella Baker and the Civil Rights Movement. For more information see Pitre et al. *Southern Black Women in the Modern Civil Rights Movement*.

The stories of black women killed by police officers rarely gain the same amount of attention as those of black males. The effacement of female black victims of police brutality in public discourse is again a sign of how normative schemes decide who counts as human. Women are turned invisible as their images, names, and narratives are not shared by the media. This normative power “works through radical effacement, so that there never was a human, there never was a life, and no murder has, therefore ever taken place” (Butler, *Life* 147). In this way, black women’s deaths are effaced and their lives are negated.

As a response to the silence around black women’s killings by law enforcement officers, the African American Policy Forum initiated the campaign #SayHerName to draw attention to the black female victims of state violence. By documenting the stories of Black women killed by the police, the campaign ensures that their names and narratives are not forgotten (AAPF). Moreover, it also draws attention to other forms of police violence women are confronted with, such as sexual abuse by law enforcement officers. Such campaigns remind us what is lost when we do not Say Her Name: “We not only miss half the facts, we fundamentally fail to grasp how the laws, policies, and the culture that underpin gender inequalities are reinforced by America’s racial divide” (Chatelain qtd. in Chatelain and Asoka 54). Hence, BLM tries to empower those whose life experiences are shaped by the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and further aspects of a person’s identity that are often marginalized.

BLM has started as a hashtag in response to the rampant police brutality in the United States and has now evolved into a movement that not only allows for the input of all black people but also centralizes those who were often left behind. It has revealed the misconception behind the idea of colorblindness in the United States and has instead shed light on the realities of police violence and institutional racism, as well as more far-reaching problems of African Americans. Most importantly, BLM has instilled a feeling of pride and love in the black community, inspiring black individuals to continue to believe that their lives and stories matter. Thus, it has fueled more people to engage in their own personal forms of activism and provide a counternarrative to those stories of the black victims who have lost their lives unjustly at the hands of police officers. As will be demonstrated in this thesis, books are a powerful medium to raise attention to racial discrimination and empower those concerned by giving them hope and a character they can identify with.

### 3. Young Adult Literature

#### 3.1. Definition of Young Adult Literature

Due to the multitude of definitions and the uncertainty about who exactly falls under the category of “young adult,” there is no single straightforward explanation of what YA fiction is. The beginnings of YA literature as a separate category from children’s or adult literature can be traced back to 1904, when adolescence was introduced by G. Stanley Hall as a new stage of life between childhood and adulthood. His definition of adolescents comprised those persons between the ages of twelve and nineteen years (Cart, *Romance* 3-4). However, adolescents were still widely perceived as children until the late 1930s, which is why literature written for young adults has long been labeled as “children’s literature.” Thus, YA fiction was in fact published before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but only gradually began to be acknowledged as a separate category after 1930 when librarians recognized the sales potential of literature directed at adolescents (11-12). The labels “teen” and “young adult” are often used interchangeably today, although “Teen Fiction” mostly refers to readers between twelve and 14 years old and “Young Adult Fiction” aims at readers older than 14 (Williams).

Deciding on a particular age group has been especially complicated as YA literature, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has attracted a growing number of readers beyond adolescents. Market research in September 2012 revealed that more than half of the buyers of YA literature are older than 18, and most of them are between 30 and 44 years old. The majority declared that they had purchased the books for themselves (Bowker). Popular books such as Joanne K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*, which often include movie adaptations and a giant merchandise industry, have broadened the readership of YA literature (Cart, *State*). The YA book industry has successfully established itself as a thriving market, which is reflected in the number of books published every year. Between 2002 and 2012, the number of YA fiction has more than doubled with 4,700 new titles being published in 2002 and more than 10,000 in 2012 (Peterson). Considering these facts, it can be argued that YA fiction is a term to a great extent created by the industry to enter a new market rather than a term that delineates a particular age group.

Thus, YA fiction can be better described with regard to its prevalent themes. YA is a category of literature that encompasses a wide variety of genres, such as fantasy, non-fiction,

or historical fiction (Doll). While not necessarily exclusively targeted at young adults, it is always about young adults. As Patty Campbell points out:

The central theme of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the question “Who am I and what am I going to do about it?” No matter what events are going on in the book, accomplishing that task is really what the book is about, and in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization for the protagonist that helps shape an adult identity. (qtd. in Nilsen and Donelson 4)

Although the topics are varied, YA literature mostly recounts the lives and problems of young characters who face issues other young people are also confronted with. The experiences of YA protagonists are very close to those situations or imaginations of their readers. Thus, the YA genre is known for its display of emotions also experienced by young adults. As Nilsen and Donelson argue, well-written YA novels represent the psychological aspects of young adult life in a realistic way, which can vary from love to horror to fear (30; 35).

Those emotions are best shown if written from the perspective of a young adult. For David Belbin, this characteristic is the decisive element that distinguishes YA literature from other genres: “[I]f it’s narrated through a young adult consciousness – even if the narrator is sophisticated, or unreliable – then it’s a Young Adult novel” (141). Thus, YA fiction is often told in first person as this narrative style helps readers to empathize with the narrator’s emotions. It lends the story an immediacy that facilitates the process of gaining the reader’s attention (Nilsen and Donelson 26). YA fiction can help young readers negotiate their identities as it serves as a way to examine the world around them through the eyes of the protagonist (36). In the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), Cart summarizes one of the “chief values of young adult literature,” which is

in its capacity to offer readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages. Young adulthood is, intrinsically, a period of tension. On the one hand young adults have an all-consuming need to belong. But on the other, they are also inherently solipsistic, regarding themselves as being unique, which – for them — is not cause for celebration but, rather, for despair. For to be unique is to be unlike one’s peers, to be “other,” in fact. And to be “other” is to not belong but, instead, to be outcast. Thus, to see oneself in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the reassurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity. (*Value*)

YA literature as such can guide young readers in difficult situations as they identify with fictional peers. YA novels show them that they are not “the other” but that their problems are shared by more people.

Although the traditional use of first-person narration is still prevalent in contemporary YA fiction, a trend for a greater variety of narrative styles has emerged in recent years. Koss and Teale link the authors' willingness to experiment with more narrative techniques to the swift changes technology brings, as "[i]nformation comes to us piecemeal, causing the need to blend multiple perspectives and points of view into one cohesive whole" (570). The effects of alternating stories told by multiple voices and multiple narrators are different to those of first-person narratives. By transmitting the story through different lenses, the readers "acquire a kind of intimate omniscience" (Gillis 52) that allows them to consider multiple perspectives on a certain topic. The juxtaposition of different points of view creates tension and shows each narrator's opinion and feelings with regard to the topic. The effect of narrational multiplicity also becomes apparent in one of the novels discussed in this thesis, namely *AAB* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely.

Furthermore, the topics addressed in YA literature have also changed over the years. While the majority of YA novels used to depict romanticized experiences of white, middle-class protagonists, the shift towards realistic situations of different narrators began in the mid-1960s. Taboos such as divorce, sexuality, and racial discrimination were addressed, and stories told by characters whose voices had previously gone unheard were increasingly told (Nilsen and Donelson 32). Over time, the topics shifted from the problem novel of the 70s, to romance and horror in the 80s, to more complex themes in the 90s with the rise of middle school literature. Today, YA fiction increasingly provides not only multiple perspectives, but also gives minorities a voice (Cart, *Romance* 96). Thus, contemporary authors extend the boundaries of topics addressed in YA fiction as they depict new characters, new settings, and diverse life situations of juveniles. Topics such as crime, drugs, and violence are tackled upfront and shape the characters' development throughout the story (Glasgow 47). As contemporary YA literature includes more diverse characters of different backgrounds, more young readers have the opportunity to identify with them and "play with their identities in a safe and controlled manner" (Koss and Teale 569). This development in the field of YA literature is essential in a diverse world, considering that books can help young readers to negotiate their identities and realize that they are not alone with their problems.

### 3.2. Black Stories Matter: African Americans in Young Adult Literature

While African American characters in YA literature were rare during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a few black writers and activists, as well as white writers published novels featuring black characters early on. Du Bois was one of the first to write literature targeted at the Black youth and laid the foundation for further African American children or YA books (Bishop, *African* 4).<sup>11</sup> In 1920, he launched *The Brownies' Book*, the first periodical for African American children. In the magazine, he published works by different African American authors, who wrote across different genres such as folktales, poetry, drama, and biographies. His goal was to educate young readers about the history and achievements of African Americans, to instill pride and hope in black children, and to inspire them to speak for their rights (V. Harris 544-45).

Apart from a few African American authors who tried to provide young readers with a wider variety of characters, black people also occurred in white writers' fiction. Their portrayals of African Americans were often stereotyped and perpetuated misrepresentations about slavery (Bishop, *Reflections* 8). Thus, as Brown points out, African Americans have "met with as great injustice in American literature as [they have] in American life" (180). These stereotypes were so deeply ingrained that "[m]any books published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first two-thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> present Black characters as objects of ridicule and generally inferior beings" (Bishop, *Reflections* 6).

This raises the question as to what exactly can be defined as African American YA literature. While some scholars categorize only books written by and about black people as African American literature, others emphasize the importance of the content and not the author. This discussion brings questions about self-determination, authenticity, and authority to the table: Who has the right to represent another person's story and in how far can that representation be authentic (Bishop, *African* 4)? The author Jacqueline Woodson answers the question of authenticity as follows:

I do not believe someone who is not a person of color can know the roads I and my people have traveled, the depths and heights we reach in our trek from children to young adults. I do not believe anyone who is not of color can step inside our worlds, our skins, our childhoods - and write from there. No, to write Black children's literature, the major criterion is that at some point in your life - you had to have been a Black child. (49)

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<sup>11</sup> Given the fact that fiction showing common characteristics of what is today called YA literature has long been labeled children's literature, the latter term occurred more often in researching the development of African American YA literature. As such, the two notions are used interchangeably in this chapter.

In this definition, in order for a book to be labeled African American YA literature, the author must have experienced what it feels like to be black in the United States. As novelists write through their own cultural experiences, mere interpretations of black life risk failing to be authentic representations of African Americans. Thus, African American YA literature can be defined as written both by and about African Americans.

African Americans continued their efforts to write literature the black youth could identify with; however, black YA authors were still rare during the next decades. At the end of the Civil Rights Movement, Nancy Larrick, in her 1965 essay “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” addressed the omission of black individuals from children’s books and resultant psychological effects on young readers. By arguing that “our children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books” (63), she explains that white children are taught to be seen as privileged and black children as disposable. The few books that featured one or more black children were often placed outside of the United States or before World War II, depicting issues that were removed from contemporary experiences of the black youth living in the 1960s (63-64). Similarly, Walter Dean Myers, one of the most popular African American authors of children’s literature of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, remembers the dearth of black YA fiction when he grew up in the 1950s and its negative effects on his self-perception:

What happened as a result, in retrospect, was that I devalued my own experiences. I decided at about 14 I would stop being Negro—that was the phrase then. Books transmit values, and if you don’t find your life in books, bingo, you have to reach the conclusion that you are less valuable. (qtd. in Doll)

Although racist misrepresentations of African Americans were rarer in the 1950s, the omission of black characters indicated that racist ideologies persisted in YA literature. White characters were presented as the norm, thus superior, black children were negated their narratives.

Inspired by voices like Larrick’s, who addressed the omission of black characters from children’s literature, and movements that celebrated black creativity, such as the Black Arts Movements, an increasing number of writers began telling stories of black young adults in the late 1960s and 1970s. The experiences of the African American youth began to be represented in mainstream YA literature, although the number of books published about white characters was still disproportionately higher compared to the number of those published about people of color (Nel qtd. in Strauss).

With the rise of multicultural YA literature in the 1990s, more African American writers, like for example Jacqueline Woodson and Angela Johnson, emerged (Bishop, *Reflections* 12). However, as the trend for YA fiction in general and multicultural YA fiction gradually continued in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, white protagonists still widely remained the norm, as

can be seen in the example of arguably the three most popular YA series *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games* (Doll). Moreover, whitewashing was and still is a popular marketing practice that systematically excludes black children from YA literature. Whitewashed covers, that is covers displaying white characters who are originally non-white in the story, are thought to help drive the sales of YA books as industries fear that a black face on the cover might deter people from buying the book. Thereby, whiteness in YA fiction is not only commonly promoted as normative in the narrative itself, but the few black protagonists who occur in fiction are also denied their race on the cover (Nel 27).

With the emergence of BLM in 2014, Myers and the We Need Diverse Books™ (WNDB) campaign once again raised the same question that Nancy Larrick had asked fifty years ago: “Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books?”<sup>12</sup> The fact that increasing attention has been drawn to this question during periods of civil rights activism shows that racism is still persistent, it “endures because racism is structural: it’s embedded in culture, and in institutions” (Nel 1), and thus it is also hidden in YA literature. As a response, awards and organizations have been founded to promote YA books written by and about people of color. New awards which specifically honor the works of YA African American authors such as The Coretta Scott King Award and organizations promoting the diversity in books for young readers such as WNDB help embrace and inspire new African American YA authors today. The organizations envision “a world in which all children can see themselves in a book” (WNDB) and thereby ensure that all children and young adults can gain inspiration and find role models in a wider variety of literature.

Only in recent years, African American YA fiction has gained high popularity and sales have risen exponentially. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has documented the YA books being published by or about African Americans since 1985 and by or about Latinos, Asian/Pacific Americans, and Native Americans since 1994. Between 2002 and 2017, the number of books published both by and about African Americans has more than doubled. However, the vast majority of books published about African Americans are still published by non-black writers: only 122 out of a total 340 works about black people were also written by African Americans (CCBC).

The organizations and awards in support of African American YA literature might have contributed to the rise of new black YA authors today. The fiction by writers like Jayson Reynolds, Nic Stone, and Angie Thomas, whose works will be analyzed in this thesis, are often

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<sup>12</sup> See Walter Dean Myers, “Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books?”



mentioned as examples that represent the new diversity in contemporary YA literature (Alter; Green).

### **3.2.1. Common Themes of African American Young Adult Literature**

The experiences of African American characters in YA fiction differs from those of other communities as they are influenced by inherent historical, political, and social factors of what it means to be a young black person in the United States. Bishop argues that African American YA fiction can be defined as a “literature of purpose” (*Reflections* 10); it emerged and continues to be written as a response to the social, political, and economic situations with which African Americans historically were and still are confronted. Thus, although being Americans, the experience of black people in the United States differs from those of other citizens, being “a part of and yet apart from American society.” Bishop cites Ellison’s idea of the “concord of sensibilities” (qtd. in *Reflections* 6) shared by African Americans that makes them a distinctive subgroup within the United States. This collective worldview has been influenced “by the values passed from one generation to the next to preserve past history with a view to preparing the next generation to meet its own challenges” and by their “responses to racism to which we [the black community] have all been subjected” (10). Hence, this worldview has also shaped the topics central in African American YA literature.

African American YA literature developed out of the need to counteract the misrepresentations and absence of black people common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It tries to correct false portrayals of black history and instead embrace black achievements. Moreover, YA fiction makes black narratives visible and values, instead of devaluing – as experienced by Myers –, the stories of African Americans and demonstrates that their lives matter. YA literature written from the perspective of black characters serves to provide both a mirror to and a window on the world (Bishop, *Mirror* ix). If young readers see their experiences reflected in books, the message they receive is that they are being valued. Thus, as writers try to reflect the readers’ experiences, they address topics relevant to children growing up black in the United States and incorporate aspects of black culture, customs, music, and achievers (Bishop, *Reflections* 11). Bishop summarizes the prevalent aspects of African American children and YA literature in saying that it

- (1) celebrates the strength of the Black family as a cultural institution and vehicle for survival;
- (2) bears witness to Black people's determined struggle for freedom, equality, and dignity;
- (3) nurtures the souls of Black children by reflecting back to them, both visually and verbally, the beauty and competences that we as adults see in them;
- (4) situates itself through its language and its content, within African American literary and

cultural contexts; and (5) honors the tradition of story as a way of teaching and a way of knowing. (*Free* 273)

However, African American YA books also serve as valuable tools for young white readers to develop social understanding and empathy with people whose experiences are different from their own. Literature can heighten readers' awareness of the repercussions of racial disparities that are reflected in the daily experiences of black people (Engles and Kory 53). Moreover, black YA fiction confronts people with whiteness, which is often perceived as normal and thus invisible, as Toni Morrison illustrates in *Playing in the Dark*: "American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen" (47). Thus, while the skin color of black people incessantly shapes their experiences, whiteness is only visible when confronted with blackness. African American YA literature prompts young white readers to reflect on their whiteness and realize how it shapes their lives compared to those of people of color (Engles and Kory 57). The diversity in YA fiction confronts readers with questions of social justice and perspectives different to their own, and thus keeps them from, in the words of the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "the danger of a single story," which "creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (qtd. in TEDGlobal 2009). Hence, YA fiction with diverse characters allows all young readers to imagine more than one version of reality, and to empathize with experiences of their peers.

### **3.2.2. Black Lives Matter in Contemporary Young Adult Literature**

The emergence of BLM kindled a renewed consideration of writing as a form of activism among numerous supporters of the movement. Police violence had already been picked up in many non-fiction books such as *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and *They Can't Kill Us All* by Wesley Lowery. As the topic has also entered YA fiction during the last few years, these novels have drawn praise from critics and feature on YA bestseller lists (Alter). This prevalent theme continues to increasingly inspire especially new young African American novelists to tell narratives of the black community and to show young black individuals that they are understood.

One of the main motivations of the authors is to use writing as a way to process their anger after the killings of unarmed black individuals. Angie Thomas' *THUG* started as a short story when she was still in college, written as a reaction to the shooting of the young unarmed African American Oscar Grant in 2009 (Alter). She used writing to articulate the reality of racial injustice: "It felt personal and the only thing I knew how to do instead of burning every garbage

can on campus, was I wrote” (Thomas, qtd. in Measure). Similarly, Nic Stone’s *DM* is inspired by the fatal shooting of the African American teenager Jordan Davis by a police officer at a gas station after arguing about the volume of his music in 2012 (Green).

The novels illuminate the reality of police brutality and give a narrative to the dead. Jay Coles, who published his debut novel *Tyler Johnson Was Here* in March 2018, perceives the new literary theme as “a reflection of what we’re all facing right now” (qtd. in Alter). As Thomas explains, “[i]t’s hard to be black in America,” which is why she aims to “show truth and tear down stereotypes” (qtd. in Measure) with her writing. YA fiction dealing with police brutality corrects the wrong negative images of the black victims circulating in the media. After Thomas heard college students debating Oscar Grant’s culpability, she wanted to counteract the descriptions of unarmed black victims as “thugs,” who were “put on trial sometimes, for their own death” (qtd. in Hirsch).

Finally, YA fiction about police brutality clearly also serves to redress the lack of diversity in literature and provide black adolescents with relatable fictional characters. Thomas, who used to be a teenager rapper, aims to give black individuals what she scarcely found in literature during her childhood and adolescence: a literary role model. Instead, she turned to HipHop as “[r]appers told the stories I connected with; books didn’t” (qtd. in Measure).

Considering the fact that many individuals who were fatally shot by police officers in the past years were black teenagers, it is not surprising that the topic is particularly widely covered in YA literature. The new wave of YA literature dismantling the realities of police brutality contributes to showing young readers that black lives do matter. Literature allows writers to challenge the prevalent image of black people as thugs and threats and instead display black humanity: “I believe there is power in words, power in asserting our existence, our experience, our lives, through words. That sharing our stories confirms our humanity” (Ward).

## 4. Black Lives Matter in Selected Young Adult Novels

### 4.1. Analysis of Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*

#### 4.1.1. Sounding “white” and Acting “ghetto”

Growing up in the poor black neighborhood of Garden Heights while attending a predominantly white school in Williamson, the autodiegetic narrator Starr alternately interacts within two diverging communities. She constantly has to adapt her behavior according to expectations of other people as she realizes that there are two versions of herself, each incompatible with the other: “There are just places where it’s not enough to be me. Either version of me” (3). Thus, shaped by experiences of both Williamson and Garden Heights, Starr develops two different identities.

The turning point that makes the protagonist understand the differences between her schoolmates’ hometown and her own is when she overhears her parents talk about the reason her friend Hailey is not allowed to spend the night at hers: Hailey’s father does not want his daughter to stay in “the ghetto” (36). As Starr explains, “That’s when I realized Williamson is one world and Garden Heights is another, and I have to keep them separate.” Thus, as other people negatively define and portray her own neighborhood as a place – in the words of Yancy – “that is to be feared, disciplined” (12), Starr completely rejects the Garden Heights version of herself when surrounded by people from Williamson. She avoids talking about her neighborhood with her schoolmates for fear of hearing them decry it, and subsequently herself, as “ghetto”: “I can never let anyone think I’m ghetto” (95). Influenced by the white gaze, Starr censors her behavior so that the negative associations of Garden Heights are not transferred to the image people have about her, which consequently causes a split between her African American self and the self imposed on her by white hegemony.

Realizing that the surroundings she grew up in are different to her schoolmates’ neighborhood, Starr experiences what Fanon calls “a certain sensitizing” (132). Within the white environment, she lays off her habits from Garden Heights and conforms to white expectations. As Fanon points out, when the process of sensitizing takes place, the black individual “stops behaving as an *actional* person. His actions are destined for ‘the Other’ (in the guise of the white man), since only ‘the Other’ can enhance his status and give him self-esteem at the ethical level.” The assumption that white people decide what is considered

appropriate demeanor is so instilled in the black mind that the black person tries to adapt to this prescribed behavior. Fanon explains behavioral patterns echoed by Starr, who changes her demeanor according to white standards and rejects her habits from her black background, referring to an “inferiority complex.” According to Fanon, in the collective unconscious, blackness is associated with “ugliness, sin, darkness, and immorality” (169). Whiteness, on the other hand, symbolizes innocence, purity, and civilization. In this binary worldview, blackness is constructed as the antithesis to whiteness. This means that in order to be accepted as a decent person, the black individual has to take on the white mask and adapt to white standards:

Moral consciousness implies a kind of split, a fracture of consciousness between a dark and a light side. Moral standards require the black, the dark, and the black man to be eliminated from his consciousness. A black man, therefore, is constantly struggling against his own image. (170)

Starr’s struggle against her own image can be observed as she constantly tries to resist negative ascriptions of the white society, and seeks white recognition, adapting her demeanor according to white morals. Navigating the two versions of herself, Starr experiences a “twoness” (Du Bois 7) as her identity is divided between the way she sees herself and the way the outside world, the white world, perceives her. As she constantly tries to maintain awareness of white people’s perception of her, she develops a “double-consciousness,” a term coined by Du Bois in 1903. According to him, the black individual lives in a world that

only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar situation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (7)

Attending a school in an affluent white neighborhood, Starr experiences some form of double-consciousness as she looks at herself through the eyes of a white gaze and acts according to certain “guidelines” (Thomas 76) she has established for herself. Those guidelines particularly concern her language and her behavior, hence the impression she conveys from the outside:

I just have to be normal Starr at normal Williamson. That means flipping the switch in my brain so I’m Williamson Starr. Williamson Starr doesn’t use slang – if a rapper would say it, she doesn’t say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her “hood.” Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she’s the “angry black girl.” Williamson Starr is approachable. No stank-eyes, side-eyes, none of that. Williamson Starr is nonconfrontational. Basically, Williamson Starr doesn’t give anyone a reason to call her ghetto. (71)

In order to fit into both societies, the protagonist engages in code-switching as a survival technique. While code-switching, in linguistic studies, is usually described as the alternate use of two or more different languages by a speaker within one conversation (Grosjean 52), the phenomenon has increasingly been used to refer not only to different languages but also to varieties of one language, pronunciation, or behavior based on the speaker's setting. In this sense, code-switching allows individuals to fit in with various groups and to present themselves in a specific way. As Starr engages in code-switching, she adapts her vocabulary and pronunciation according to the people with whom she interacts. Depending on her surrounding, she "speak[s] with two different voices" (Thomas 301): in a white environment, Starr "choose[s] every word carefully and make[s] sure [she] pronounce[s] them well" (95), whereas in her black community, she adapts so as not to "sound 'white'" (357). The black vernacular she uses at home is replaced by standard English in Williamson. As her neighborhood has many associations that create the image of a "ghetto," she acts as the complete opposite to what people might expect from an adolescent growing up in Garden Heights. Starr also illustrates the differences between her white peers and herself. While they can make use of jargon and will be referred to as cool, her use of black vernacular would only confirm white people's assumptions about African Americans, associating her with her neighborhood. Code-switching allows Starr to negotiate her two identities and interact within both white and black communities.

As the novel progresses, Starr increasingly tries to incorporate both of her identities, which inevitably creates an internal conflict. While attempting to fit into a white-dominated society, she simultaneously yields to assume her identity as an African American. This leads her to question how to best negotiate her diverging identities: "I should be used to my two worlds colliding, but I never know which Starr I should be. I can use some slang, but not too much slang, some attitude, but not too much attitude, so I'm not a 'sassy black girl'. I have to watch what I say and how I say it, but I can't sound 'white'" (357). She wants to achieve a balance between both identities without losing one or the other, and this wish to merge two identities into one self creates confusion and doubt. Starr fights to define herself in a world where black people are often defined by white people. She keeps all the parts of her life that might allow people from her school to blemish her image outside of Williamson: "People use it against me. Either I'm poor Starr who saw her friend get killed in a drive-by, or Starr the charity case who lives in the ghetto" (300). She does not want to be reduced to small fractions of herself that might strike white people as different.

When Starr witnesses the killing of her childhood friend Khalil, she finds herself in an inner conflict as her two worlds collide and she can no longer keep them apart. When Starr and

her friends from Williamson, Hailey and Maya, see her neighborhood being shown on TV, she watches her hometown through the white gaze: “I tense as footage of my neighborhood, my home, is shown. It’s like they picked the worst parts – the drug addicts roaming the streets, the broken-down Cedar Grove projects, gangbangers flashing signs, bodies on the sidewalks with white sheets over them” (245). The media’s portrayal of Garden Heights makes Starr feel ashamed of her origins. When her two friends confront her with the question whether she knew the unarmed black victim, she is overwhelmed and ponders the consequences of identifying as the witness: “If it’s revealed that I was in the car, what will that make me? The thug ghetto girl with the drug dealer? What will my teachers think about me? My friends?” (113). Starr’s primary cause of distress is invariably influenced by her double-consciousness, namely the potential image other people might create of her once they see her connection to the victim. Afraid of how the truth might destroy the carefully crafted image of Williamson Starr, the protagonist denies having known Khalil. This denial of her fatally shot childhood friend represents the ultimate rejection of her black identity within the context of Williamson.

#### **4.1.2. Understanding Blackness and Misunderstanding “black things”**

While Starr attempts to blend in with the white community of Williamson, she is aware that her blackness is a fundamental but distinctive part of herself that cannot be fully understood by her white peers. Constantly oscillating between ‘Williamson Starr’ and ‘Garden Heights Starr’, she realizes the person who accepts both versions of herself is her boyfriend Chris. They share the love for the sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, a series with which Starr identifies as she draws a parallel between the protagonist Will’s experiences of living in-between a poor and wealthy community and her own. As Starr explains, watching the series is “like seeing parts of my life on screen,” as although her parents “didn’t send me to my aunt and uncle in a rich neighborhood, they sent me to a bougie private school” (35). Thus, even though the comedy principally reflects the privileged life of Will, it still allows Chris to better understand Starr’s identity divide. The protagonist sees his interest in black pop culture as a way that “helps him get me” (83). Thus, with him she can reveal parts of both her identities: “I don’t have to decide which Starr I have to be with him. He likes both.” However, although Starr gives Chris insights into more facets of herself, she still carefully chooses which parts of herself to show him and does not grant him access to the parts of her life that make her feel vulnerable. He has never seen her neighborhood and does not know that Starr has already witnessed the murder of two of her best friends, Natasha and Khalil. Again, she is afraid of how his perception of her might change upon learning about her background: “Once you’ve seen how broken someone is it’s like seeing them

naked – you can't look at them the same anymore." Thus, even in front of her boyfriend, Starr takes care to keep the parts of her prefabricated self together without shattering the picture she has carefully designed for the outside world.

Chris' character shows that despite his interest in black popular culture and endeavor to understand Starr's background, there is a certain threshold of experience unique to black people that white people cannot attain. Without realizing, Chris has internalized hegemonic ways of seeing that perpetuate whiteness as the norm. He classifies Starr's problem he does not understand as "other" by calling it "one of those black things I won't understand" (230-31), signifying that they are beyond the realms of white experience. As he bases questions of what is considered normal upon white ideals, he is influenced by white normativity. This internalization of the white imaginary can be observed when Chris talks about black people's names: "Why do some people give their kids odd names? I mean, look at you guys' names. They're not normal" (401). Living in a predominantly white society, Chris defines names that do not correspond to his picture of adequate names as deviant; to him, normativity is centered around white standards. Starr's brother Seven challenges Chris' thinking by asking, "What makes his name or our names any less normal than yours? Who or what defines 'normal' to you?" Seven shows him that he has "fallen into the trap of the white standard" and thereby prompts Chris to reconsider his worldview and definitions of normativity. As Starr's brother clarifies, what is considered "normal" is inherently a matter of perspective.

As Chris is aware of the fact that he does not know everything about his girlfriend, this creates a conflict between the two of them based on racial difference. As Starr explains, he would not understand her because he is white and fails to see that, in today's society, race still matters:

"I'm white?" he says, like he's just hearing that for the first time. "What the fuck's that got to do with anything?"

"Everything! You're white, I'm black. You're rich, I'm not."

"That doesn't matter!" he says. "I don't care about that kinda stuff, Starr. I care about you."

"That kinda stuff is part of me!" (161)

In this conversation, Chris finds himself confronted with his white privilege, of which he might not have been aware previously. His colorblind ideology prevents him from seeing that Starr's blackness fundamentally influences the opportunities she receives, how she is treated by others, and interacts with others. As she asserts, blackness is an essential part of her identity. Hence, she understands that "[a]s much as I say I don't have to choose which Starr I am with Chris, maybe without realizing it, I have to an extent. Part of me feels like I can't exist around people



like him” (301). Although the protagonist feels at ease with Chris, their racial differences influence their relationship. Only when Chris literally enters Starr’s real world by visiting Garden Heights and ultimately taking part in the fierce protests against police brutality does he apprehend Starr’s struggles as a black girl in America.

Moreover, Starr becomes increasingly aware of the difference of opinions between Hailey and herself. Her friend sees herself as an open-minded and tolerant person, and yet she vehemently rejects Starr’s activist message on Tumblr. In reaction to Starr’s post of a picture of the fourteen-year-old black boy Emmett Till, who was brutally mutilated and murdered for whistling at a white woman in 1955, Hailey ‘un-follows’ her. Rather than being shocked by the atrocities inflicted upon the black body by white racists, Hailey is outraged by Starr’s decision to reblog “such an awful picture” (77). After posts about petitions, the Black Panthers, or Marcus Garvey, the symbolic picture of Emmett Till exemplifying the cruelties endured by the black body acts as the final straw for Hailey, leading her to ‘un-follow’ her best friend so as not to be confronted with that “black stuff” (250) anymore. Thus, Hailey’s reaction shows her ignorance and refusal to critically reflect on history and racial injustices. As Baldwin observes, “people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity” (*Fire* 13). Direct confrontation with evidence of America’s horrific past, which continues to have an effect on the present, would subvert Hailey’s understanding of the United States and her identity as a white person: she ignores the past, and, in doing so, she also turns a blind eye to the problems of the present.

Furthermore, Starr increasingly becomes aware of the microaggression she is exposed to as a black girl in Williamson. She is personally offended by Hailey’s racist remarks for the first time when the latter calls out to her during a basketball game: “Pretend the ball is some fried chicken. Bet you’ll stay on it then” (Thomas 111). This seemingly harmless but hurtful joke informed by racial stereotypes can be perceived as racist by the addressee, as Starr notes: “You made a fried chicken comment to the only black girl in the room” (112). As one of the only black students at Williamson, Starr regularly faces microaggressive comments from her peers that uphold racist stereotypes. By directly confronting Hailey with the inappropriateness of her joke, Starr challenges her microaggressive behavior. As Sullivan notes, habits of white privilege are not only rendered invisible and often go unnoticed, but they also “actively thwart the process of conscious reflection on them, which allows them to seem nonexistent even as they continue to function” (6). Thus, Starr realizes that what makes microaggression so problematic is that “[w]e let people say stuff, and they say it so much that it becomes okay to

them and normal for us” (Thomas 252). As will be illustrated in the other two novels discussed in this thesis, white people often engage in microaggression without realizing and tend to minimize its effect. As the novel progresses, Starr increasingly challenges her friend’s behavior, finding her own voice with which to speak against prevailing racist stereotypes and ideologies.

The protagonist gradually accepts her background and develops black pride. As she listens to the media and Hailey talk disrespectfully about Garden Heights and its residents, she disengages herself more and more from the yoke of the white gaze: “I’m breaking all of my Williamson Starr rules with zero fucks to give” (184). Thus, when she reveals her identity as the witness of Khalil’s fatal shooting, she also allows her Garden Heights identity to merge into her Williamson identity. Starr comes to terms with her feelings towards her neighborhood and realizes why she has always hidden her origins: “I was ashamed of Garden Heights and everything in it. It seems stupid now though. I can’t change where I come from or what I’ve been through, so why should I be ashamed of what makes me, me? That’s like being ashamed of myself” (441). Starr understands that denying any one of her selves means denying herself; she can no longer keep her two selves separate and learns to appreciate both identities. Releasing herself from her self-imposed inhibitions, she feels empowered to speak up and help people from her neighborhood combat the injustices they experience.

#### **4.1.3. The Thuggification of Blackness**

Misunderstandings such as those of Starr’s white friends about stereotypes about black people are to a great extent transmitted by the media. The role of media propaganda in the posthumous creation of the victim’s narrative is critically examined in the novel. After the police shooting, Khalil is attributed with negative connotations such as “threat,” “thug,” or “drug dealer.” People often unconsciously look for behavioral explanations for the police officer’s shooting of an unarmed Khalil, and even Starr’s family questions whether her friend presented himself as a threat to Officer Brian Cruise. Starr’s uncle Carlos, being a police officer himself, tries to rationalize the officer’s actions by referring to Khalil’s alleged background as a drug dealer, which “could explain Brian’s decision if he felt threatened” (52). Carlos’ reaction shows that the internalization of prevalent stereotypes about black people is not a behavior unique to white people but also happens to individuals of the same community. The power of the white gaze can also condition people of color to believe that the black individual, who has already been marked as a threat a priori by the white gaze, is at fault.

The ascription of the black body as dangerous and guilty regardless of the circumstances can also be observed in the interrogation of Starr conducted by the police. As sole witness to

her friend's death, she plays a fundamental role in delivering justice for Khalil. However, she is also aware of the fact that her credibility might be questioned due to racist bias: her black body, which "is by nature criminal" (Yancy 35), is more easily judged as guilty than the accused's white body, which "is by nature innocent, pure, and good." Hence, when testifying at the police station, Starr feels the weight of the investigator's white gaze. During her testimony, the rules of behavior she has learned from "the talk" resonate in her head. She continuously reminds herself: "*Keep your hands visible*," "*No sudden moves*," and "*Only speak when spoken to*" (95). Although her motivation for the interrogation with the police is to help advance the investigation about Khalil's killing, the fear of being judged guilty is always present: "*I know I haven't done anything wrong*" (96). Starr is aware of the fact that black bodies are often perceived as criminal merely because of the color of their skin, as her father reminds her before the encounter with the police: "Tell the cops the truth, and don't let them put words in your mouth. [...] And remember you didn't do nothing wrong – the cop did. Don't let them make you think otherwise" (58-59). Recalling her father's advice, Starr realizes the turn the investigation takes. Instead of talking about Officer Cruise, the police inquire as to whether Khalil did "comply," seemed "irate" or "hesitant" (99), and ask her about Khalil's affiliation with gangs and the allegations of him as a drug dealer. Evidently, the police have already manifested Khalil's image as the source of danger even before the interrogation of the witness. Within their racist imaginary schema, they fail to grasp the imminent reality of their own brutality, and transfer Khalil's vulnerability to themselves, while simultaneously construing the victim as the agent of violence (see Butler, *Reading* 17-18). The questions directed at Starr are formulated so as to fit their preliminary conclusion that refuses to see Khalil as anything but emblematic of danger. Nevertheless, Starr challenges the interrogator's questions and tries to reaffirm Khalil's position as the object of violence: "He didn't pull the trigger on himself" (100). She refuses to let the police construe her friend's vulnerability as their own and "make them feel better about killing my friend" (102). The police's inability to comprehend the bias permeating their questions demonstrates a blindness caused by their white imaginary that has already manifested the idea of the black body as endangering.

Similarly, the media coverage and the comments made by white people show how Khalil's death is reflected mainly through a white gaze. When his name first appears in the news, the label "a Suspected Drug Dealer" (104) is added in the title, but the fact that he was unarmed is left out. The newspaper highlights Khalil's background and represents him as a thug. Moreover, media coverage about the victim is always accompanied by pictures of a rough black neighborhood, described as "a neighborhood notorious for gangs and drug dealers" (245),

and information on suspicions about gang affiliations. As Starr observes, “the news basically makes it sound like it’s Khalil’s fault he died” (140). Thereby, the attention is shifted away from the criminal act of the police officer to the victim’s alleged criminality.

Looking at a picture of Khalil distributed on the news which shows him “gripping a handful of money” (339) and which Starr’s father Maverick calls the “thugshot,” the protagonist realizes the different opinions people build about her friend, based on their internalized image of black people as thugs: “For some people, the thugshot makes him look just like that – a thug. But I see somebody who was happy to finally have some money in his hand, damn where it came from.” The quick branding of Khalil as a thug denies him a personal narrative and invites people to jump to conclusions. Knowing his background, Starr can see beyond the money in his hand being proof of his criminality. The different interpretations of one picture reveal the implicit bias affecting people’s understanding and the quick judgement specific to black individuals.

With the example of her Williamson friends, Starr realizes how one label by the media triggers deeply ingrained prejudices about black individuals and overshadows all other relevant details. When Hailey and Maya address the headline in front of Starr, she becomes aware that only certain information about the victim is remembered by the public as Hailey refers to Khalil as “the drug dealer”: “That’s how they see him. It doesn’t matter that he’s suspected of doing it. ‘Drug dealer’ is louder than ‘suspected’ ever will be” (113). Thus, conditioned by existing images about black individuals as thugs, the media coverage confirms prejudices about people from Garden Heights. Khalil’s blackness acts as a trigger for people to see the headline as a confirmation of their expectations and to ignore anything that does not fit their predesigned image of the black individual.

While Khalil’s killing is justified through his portrayal as a thug, the police officer’s action is rationalized through his portrayal as a victim. Although Starr, as the only witness to the crime, testifies to her friend’s innocence, the officer is not arrested for shooting the unarmed young man. Instead, people empathize with him and elevate his reputation as a benevolent person. Media outlets clearly contribute to this sympathetic image of Officer Cruise, as opposed to the image of Khalil that confirms people’s stereotypes. Pictures showing the officer as a smiling man on a family trip with his wife, children, and golden retriever are juxtaposed with a video of Khalil’s rough neighborhood. In spite of having killed an unarmed adolescent, people refer to him as “a good guy” (52) and feel sympathy for his “poor family” (248). Thus, the media’s refusal to label the actual perpetrator as thug or threat shows how society immediately associates whiteness, as opposed to blackness, with humanity. Officer Cruise’s whiteness grants

him sympathy and innocence. Ironically, his father complains about people who “are making him out to be a monster” (247), which is actually what happens to Khalil. Thereby, victimhood is shifted from the innocent dead black individual to the perpetrator.

While the officer’s father perfects the image of his son as a diligent citizen by highlighting his love for “working in the neighborhood” in order to “make a difference in the lives there” (245), Starr listens to him distorting the incident, talking about Starr and Khalil cursing and acting like threats. Starr is overwhelmed by his wrong remarks: “I couldn’t have taken anyone down. I was too afraid. He makes us sound like we’re superhumans. We’re kids” (246). Thus, they are viewed through a certain lens that interprets the black person as potential threat and attributes violence to them before they are seen as what they are: unarmed teenagers (see Butler qtd. in Yancy and Butler 4). As Starr explains in an interview, Khalil’s death was generated by the propagation of negative images of black people by the media, which induces false assumptions about the community: “This all happened because *he* [...] assumed that we were up to no good. Because we’re black and because of where we live. We were just two kids, minding our business, you know? His assumption killed Khalil” (290). The officer’s internalized assumptions about black people have led him to perceive a black teenager as threat and even to kill him. Khalil’s blackness thus makes him the agent rather than the object of violence (see Butler, *Reading* 16). The fact that he was a teenager and innocent is ignored by the public, who are blinded by their white imaginary. Even though the officer has taken someone’s life, his whiteness still grants him the status of the innocent person. Innocence is shown to be largely a question of color. Thus, the media’s thuggification of blackness contributes to people’s racist perceptions and devalues black lives.

#### **4.1.4. A Hierarchy of Grief: The Dehumanization of Black Life**

Khalil’s media portrayal as a criminal in the wake of his killing calls into question the importance and sufficiency of socio-economic background in explaining causality for an individual’s death. Making use of such information, the media shapes popular opinion and in doing so contributes to the dominant frame of who is considered human and therefore grievable, raising Butler’s pivotal question, central to all novels analyzed here and current BLM debates, of who is granted humanity and grievability. By constructing and spreading the narrative of the victim as a criminal, the media sends out the message that his life is less valuable. Thus, in the words of Butler, Khalil has “fallen outside the ‘human’ as it has been naturalized in its ‘Western’ mold by the contemporary workings of humanism” (*Life* 32). Classifying him a threat, the police officer denies Khalil’s humanity, which leads to the derealization of the latter’s

life. The public's reaction is only a reflection of the officer's internalized thinking: Khalil's life has already been negated before the killing and the derealization of his life is only being confirmed by the media coverage and conversations about him in the wake of his death (33-34).

The juxtaposition of the image of Officer Cruise as dutiful citizen and Khalil as drug dealer clearly establishes a hierarchy of grief to the detriment of the dead black individual. To a certain extent, this hierarchy is influenced by color and common associations of whiteness with innocence and blackness with immorality, as mentioned by Fanon (169). As such, the dominant frame that classifies people as human grants white people greater grievability than black people. As the prevalent association of black with sin does not fit Khalil's innocence, the police officer is portrayed as the victim instead and the black person is denied his grievability. Having internalized this hierarchy of grief, Hailey shows a response common among white people: "His son lost everything because he was trying to do his job and protect himself. His life matters too, you know? [...] What's wrong with saying his life matters too?" (248). Her remark initiates a discussion reminiscent of BLM debates and backlashes such as Blue Lives Matter. Hailey fails to see Khalil's death as a result of racial injustices and deeply ingrained prejudices. As Starr explains, "His life always matters more! [...] That's the problem!" Due to assumptions about black individuals as thugs, people negate Khalil's right to live and instead empathize with the white police officer. Although Officer Cruise has killed an innocent teenager, people call attention to the value of his life while denying Khalil's grievability.

By constructing the narrative of Khalil as a criminal, the media contributes to his dehumanization. As racist remarks by Hailey show, this can lead people to reduce the victim to one negative aspect of his life and negate his existence: "He was a drug dealer and a gangbanger [...]. Somebody was gonna kill him eventually" (341). Hailey reduces Khalil to a criminal person, which allows her to justify his death. She denies him his humanity and thus his grievability. When Starr is interviewed by a news program, she tries to show the public the absurdity of the discussion around Khalil's death:

I don't understand how everyone can make it seem like it's okay he got killed if he was a drug dealer and a gangbanger. [...] It seems like they always talk about what he may have said, what he may have done, what he may not have done. I didn't know a dead person could be charged in his own murder, you know? (288)

Starr reminds the public that instead of mourning a person that has been innocently killed, people posthumously put the victim on trial for his own death. Khalil is made responsible for

all the mistakes he has made in his short life as well as for the mistakes of the person responsible for his death.

While what is said about Khalil's person as a criminal clearly constructs a pronounced negative narrative, the derealization of Khalil's life also becomes apparent in what is not said. Initial media coverage of the incident is brief and omits Khalil's name. The normative schemes, which decide who counts as human, deny him his humanity through the obliteration of his name, his image, and his narrative (see Butler, *Life* 146). His life is considered unreal; thus, his death is unreal as well. In further discussions, the attribute "drug dealer" becomes more prominent than "Khalil." By erasing his name, which is a specific marker of his uniqueness and humanity, Khalil has been rendered inhuman. As a means of resistance, Starr refuses to call Officer Cruise by his name and instead refers to him by his badge number: "Officer One-Fifteen." Having taken not only her friend's life but also her childhood by exposing her to police brutality, Starr does not want to grant him more power. As she is aware of the power imbalance between the law enforcement officer and herself, she tries to assume power by taking his humanity, just like he has taken Khalil's life.

Moreover, leaving Khalil's body in the streets for hours after his murder is a blatant sign of his dehumanization. His body does not matter enough to be taken care of immediately. As Starr observes, he is treated like an object rather than like an innocent dead person: "They leave Khalil's body in the street like it's an exhibit" (25). This points to his invisibility, thus the derealization of his life, and furthermore is reminiscent of Michael Brown's body, which was also not removed from the streets for hours and sparked off the riots in Ferguson as well as igniting #BlackLivesMatter. Treating their bodies as objects that can be left at the scene of their deaths for all to see illustrates the derealization of their lives for those responsible.

In response to the propagation of Khalil's image as a thug, Starr tries to give him back his humanity. For her, Khalil is more than just the mistakes he made in his life: "Khalil matters to us, not the stuff he did" (65). Thus, she uses social media to spread her version of Khalil, which is her first step toward speaking out. Starr starts a blog entitled *The Khalil I Know*, where she posts pictures of her friend that represent him the way she remembers him. On Tumblr, she adds captions to the pictures that allow construct a truer version of Khalil's life, as for instance: "The Khalil I know was afraid of animals" (205). Consequently, people like and reblog her postings, and upload more artworks and pictures of Khalil. Thus, Starr's first form of activism is expressed through social media – a powerful medium that served as a starting point for BLM as well and remains a crucial part of the movement. By providing a counternarrative to the media coverage of Khalil, Starr questions white America's way of seeing blackness. In this way

she challenges the stereotyped image of Khalil as a thug and portrays him as a human being whose life mattered. Thus, Starr “disrupt[s] the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field” as her postings reveal “a reality that disrupt[s] the hegemonic field of representation itself” (Butler, *Life* 150). She does not only provide a single story about her friend but shows his multiple facets. By giving him a face, she demonstrates his humanity and grants him grievability.

#### 4.1.5. Rewriting the Narrative: “Thug Life”

Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves – to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action – a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle. (hooks, *Talking* 28)

As Starr becomes more conscious of her voice, she also comprehends the power of language. The power of language exercised by the dominant group labels Khalil as thug, and thus takes control over the individual through his positioning within a certain social context. As Butler notes in her opening chapter of *Excitable Speech: A Politics of Performativity*, “We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory” (1). To confer on someone a name is to recognize their existence but simultaneously a means to take away power and call their subjectivity into question. Language not only “sustain[s] the body” but “can also threaten its existence” (5). Hence, depending on the circumstances, words can have a “wounding power” (13). However, speech that wounds can also be deployed “against its originary purposes” (14) as a means of resistance. Throughout the novel, Starr learns that dominant discourses can be resisted, rewritten or reinterpreted. As the protagonist develops her awareness of existing hegemonic discourses, she engages in what hooks refers to as “self-recovery,” which means “to see ourselves as if for the first time, for our field of vision is no longer shaped and determined solely by the condition of domination” (*Talking* 31). This struggle “to read ourselves anew” (28) can be observed in the meaning of the word thug, which is discussed extensively in the novel.

As argued by Foucault (98), power is never at the hands of only the dominant group but circulates and can be coopted by the oppressed. Similarly, lexical items have no fixed meaning, but their meaning is malleable. Thus, in the novel, the word thug, which is used excessively by white people to derogatively describe black individuals, is challenged by both Khalil and Maverick as they refer to Tupac Shakur, who has reinterpreted the phrase “thug life.” According to the rapper, thug life is an acronym and translates as “The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody” (Thomas 17). Tupac divests the word of its original power and reinvests it with a



new meaning, which exceeds the intended pejorative meaning of the word as it was used by white people (see Butler, *Speech* 15). He reclaims the word commonly employed by a dominant group to derogatively refer to the black community, removes its negative associations and gives it a new meaning that draws attention to racism.

Thus, reclaiming a word also means reclaiming power. As a stigmatized group takes control over the usage of the term, its feeling of agency increases (Galinsky et al. 235). Given the fact that African Americans have long been and still are defined by others, the power to reclaim a word enhances self-esteem. Moreover, the reappropriation of a word that in its original usage denigrates dark-skinned people fills the word with positive connotations and creates “in-group affiliation” (234). Thus, it instills a sense of pride in the black community, which is essentially what BLM tries to do as well. This can also be observed in Starr’s development of self-confidence and acceptance of her diverging identities, which is bolstered through her increasing awareness of racial injustices. In that sense, the reappropriation of terms like “thug life” contributes to the assertion of the humanity of black people. The word and its renewed meaning play a significant role in the novel, which is reflected in its eponymous title.

While Starr first learns about Tupac’s understanding of thug life in the car ride with Khalil shortly before his death, the concept is an important motif throughout the novel. Starr also discusses thug life with her father, which is when she comes to understand its deeper meaning: “[I]t’s about what society feeds us as youth and how it comes back and bites them later” (168). She realizes that Tupac’s message concerns not just the youth but “[e]verybody at the bottom in society” and symbolizes the struggles of black people in the United States. As Starr’s father explains, it reflects the situation of many drug dealers in Garden Heights. To prove his point, Maverick alludes to existing racial injustices in America such as unequal education opportunities (“Our schools don’t get the resources to equip you like Williamson does,” 169), unequal career opportunities (“Corporate America don’t bring jobs to our communities”), and drugs dispersed in black neighborhoods (“How did the drugs even get in our neighborhood? [...] That shit is flown into our communities, but I don’t know anybody with a private jet,” 169-70). Thus, thug life stands for the cycle of poverty and crime in which many black individuals find themselves as a result of an oppressive system: “That’s the hate they’re giving us, baby, a system designed against us. That’s Thug Life” (170).

The novel dismantles stereotypes about black people and assumptions about drug dealers as it shows drugs, gangs, and violence not as an individual’s fault but as a consequence of a lack of opportunity. Khalil was trapped in this cycle of poverty and crime. Being provided with better opportunities, Starr at first does not comprehend her friend’s “choice” to resort to

an illegal way of earning money: “I swear to God whenever I think about Khalil falling into that life, it’s like watching him die all over again. Yeah, Khalil matters and not the stuff he did, but I can’t lie and say it doesn’t bother me or it’s not disappointing. He knew better” (236). She fails to understand that criminality often is not a matter of choice, as explained by her friend DeVante: “He didn’t wanna sell drugs, Starr [...]. Nobody really wanna do that shit. Khalil ain’t have much of a choice though” (237). Only when DeVante explains the reasons for her friend’s decision to sell drugs, Starr begins to understand: having a drug addict as mother and a terminally ill grandmother, Khalil sold drugs to pay for his mother’s debt after she took money from King, the biggest drug dealer in Garden Heights. As it turns out, Khalil refused to be a member of a gang but was turned into a “gangbanger” (288) by the media. Thus, Starr also fell prey to the one-sided assumptions about Khalil that were propagated after his death: “This is worse than denying him. I thought the worst of him” (237). Starr realizes that the derogatory names Khalil is called by others control his image and position him within the context of criminality: “I just hate how he’s being called a thug and shit when people don’t know the whole story” (238). Hence, Starr comes to the conclusion that the cyclical nature of poverty and crime traps people and leaves them without a choice: “Neither one of them thought they had much of a choice. If I were them, I’m not sure I’d make a much better one. Guess that makes me a thug too” (239). Tupac’s reappropriation of thug life aims to not only raise awareness to the confinements of social injustices but also serves as a form of empowerment. It attempts to instill hope in people and motivate them to extricate themselves from the plight they were born into.

Tupac’s art plays a crucial part in Starr’s transformation from silent witness to advocate for social justice. It helps her not only to understand Khalil’s background but also to develop pride for her community and thus speak up for her friend. As the protagonist realizes in the conversation with her father, in the context of the ongoing protests and riots, thug life means that “the system’s still giving the hate” (171) as Khalil’s death at the hands of police brutality is no exception and riots will not stop as long as the victims do not get justice. The insightful conversation with her father helps her find her voice:

“That’s why people are speaking out, huh? Because it won’t change if we don’t say something.”  
 “Exactly. We can’t be silent.”  
 “So *I* can’t be silent.”

Starr realizes the wider implications of Khalil’s death for society as a whole and comes to understand the power of her voice: “This is bigger than me and Khalil though. This is about Us, with a capital U; everybody who looks like us, feels like us, and is experiencing this pain with

us despite not knowing me or Khalil. My silence isn't helping Us." Realizing Tupac's meaning of thug life strengthens Starr's sense of community as she prioritizes the good for the black community over her own fear of speaking out by capitalizing Us. Moreover, it helps her gain access to the people in Garden Heights. She not only divests herself of the fear of speaking out but also of the shame of her black neighborhood.

Starr's motivation for raising her voice is essentially what has spurred the BLM movement. Garden Heights is the epitome of what Khan-Cullors has described as "a forgotten generation" that has been "written off" (248). Due to a lack of opportunity, its residents are trapped in the neighborhood's system of criminality. Protesting and speaking out help heighten society's awareness of their circumstances and open people's eyes to the deeper implications of racial injustice. For Starr, her voice represents a way to grant Khalil humanity and let him live through the narratives she provides. Khalil epitomizes more than just a victim of police brutality but the hate the society gives people like the residents of Garden Heights and all the other victims at the hands of police brutality. The novel challenges the normative power that decides who is considered human and remembers instead the lives of unjustly killed black people by saying their names. At the end, the book leaves the fictional realm as it provides the names of real victims of police brutality. By blurring fiction with reality, the reader is reminded of the reality of racial discrimination in today's society and suggests that Khalil's story is representative of all the other countless forgotten lives. As Starr notes that "there will always be someone ready to fight" (43), the novel moves from a descriptive level to a way of empowering its (black) readership. In that sense, *THUG* embraces black humanity and tries to ensure that black lives are not forgotten:

It would be easy to quit if it was just about me, Khalil, that night, and that cop. It's about way more than that though. It's about Seven. Sekani. Kenya. DeVante.

It's about Oscar.

Aiyana.

Trayvon.

Rekia.

Michael.

Eric.

Tamir.

John.

Ezell.

Sandra.

Freddie.

Alton.

Philando.

It's even about that little boy in 1955 who nobody recognized at first – Emmett.

[...] They're not forgetting. I think that's the most important part. (442-43)

## 4.2. Analysis of *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone

### 4.2.1. Conflicting Identities: “Where do I fit in?”

Similar to Starr, Justyce struggles to find his place in society as he is torn between two communities: the prestigious high school he attends and the poor black neighborhood where he grew up. Both the “‘bad’ area” (9) where his mother lives and his predominantly white school do not provide him with a feeling of belonging: “All I know is I can’t seem to find where I fit” (35). Exposed to the white gaze, black individuals are robbed of their right to define themselves. As Fanon explains, the image of his body is “an image in the third person” (90) as the white society has already “woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (91). Trying to find his place in society, the white gaze dissects him, positions him, and creates its own image of the black individual (95). Out of this positioning by others arises confusion and the question “Where do I fit in?” (93), as echoed by Justyce, who is made to feel by his schoolmates that he does not belong to his high school.

As the protagonist tries to negotiate his identities within his diverging societies, torn between two directions, he comes into an inner conflict. When he joins his white friends for Halloween, who, in an effort to prove that racism is bygone concern, dress in stereotypical clothes as for instance a Klansman costume, he runs into a gang from his mother’s neighborhood called Black Jihad. As the encounter between the two groups results in an intense argument, Justyce must choose whether to leave with his questionably dressed white friends or to stay with the gang that lives in the same area he grew up in:

Well, either way it went, I was sayin somethin’, you know? Staying woulda been a statement of solidarity with these guys I grew up with – and who look like me. Leaving was a different statement, and the fact that I chose to do it with a white guy who was dressed as a Klansman... (Stone, *DM* 48)

To some extent, Justyce identifies with both groups but does not feel he completely belongs to either. His struggle to find a group where he might belong leads him to question his place at school and consider joining the Black Jihad gang. Much like Starr, he is torn between two communities that are both part of him but seem to be incompatible with each other.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist learns to carve out a space for himself that is neither black nor white. His self-determination in the negotiation of his identity is vital in order to counter the white gaze, as argued by James Baldwin: “You’ve got to tell the world how to treat you. If the world tells you how you are going to be treated, you are in trouble” (qtd. in Popova). Justyce realizes that society holds on to the idea that identity is fixed by birth and that

he has to assert his identity to the world instead. He feels “pull[ed] [...] to the ground [...] from two directions” (Stone, *DM* 66): While his white schoolmates question his success at school because of his poor background, the gang from his neighborhood forecasts his failure in a white society: “You’ll be back, smart guy. Once you see them white folks don’t want yo black ass at they table. They not down with you bein’ their equal, dawg. We’ll see you soon” (65). This example illustrates “how the Black body has been historically marked” and “marginalized” (Yancy 40), constituted as not succeeding in a white world, that is, a supposedly superior world. As exemplified by the gang, this idea has also been internalized by members of the black community themselves. As Yancy elaborates: “This history also partly *positions* me, constituting my identity and thus informing my *lived* standpoint.” Thus, much like Starr’s, Justyce’s split identities are caused by people incessantly evoking stereotypes about black people, which irretrievably position him within fixed ideas about African Americans’ behavior. Justyce’s mother encourages him to resist letting other people position him even though his future plans might not fit their idea of an African American boy’s life: “I’ve been tellin’ you since you were small that you gotta *make* a place for yourself in this world. [...] You ever consider that maybe you not supposed to ‘fit’?” (36). Hence, the negotiation of his identity is located beyond black and white in the “in-between,” as suggested by Bhabha (4), an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity.” This hybrid identity gives rise to a new space, a Third Space, where the negotiation of meaning can take place, and which allows new positions to emerge (37). Thus, as Justyce tries to figure out where to fit in, he creates a third space that enables him to interweave contradicting identities.

While Starr’s self-empowerment is initiated by inspirations like Tupac, Justyce turns to African Americans he looks up to for guidance. However, contrary to Starr, whose path for speaking out was largely motivated by conversations with friends and family, Justyce’s very personal ruminations on his experiences through writing constitute an important step in making sense of society, as he begins writing letters to Martin Luther King, Jr. The activist’s words serve as inspiration and help him cope with his problems as he constantly asks himself: “*What would Martin do?*” (202). King, who fought for racial equality by advocating nonviolence, represents his role model, according to whose teachings he strives to live. Moreover, he takes part in his school’s debate team, where the students discuss ongoing controversial topics of the United States, often related to racial inequality. This class gives him the opportunity to reflect critically on his experiences as a black boy in America. His conversations with Doc, his debating team advisor, help him understand his position in society: “You can’t change how

other people think and act, but you're in full control of *you*. When it comes down to it, the only question that matters is this: If nothing in the world ever changes, what type of man are *you* gonna be?" (152). Hence, Justyce realizes that while he cannot control the white gaze, he can resist "the white gaze's entry into [his] own self-vision" (Yancy 24). Both his letters to King and the discussions in the debate team facilitate the negotiation of his hybrid identities and the development of self-empowerment.

#### **4.2.2. Framing the Black Body: "Thug Extraordinaire"**

Much like in the other novels, the boys' image as thugs is propagated by the media in the wake of Manny's death. Wrong details are added to the story of the incident, such as Justyce's possession of a gun and the boys' threatening behavior. As the police officer Garrett Tison's neighbor asserts, "The man was defending himself from thugs [...]. I've known Garrett for twenty-five years. If he says those boys had a gun, they had a gun" (131). Their blackness obscures the fact that the officer killed a teenager and instead emphasizes their own guilt. To put it in the words of Yancy, the neighbor "suffers from a structured blindness, a sociopsychologically reinforcing opacity that obstructs the process of 'seeing' beyond falsehoods and various modes of whitely bodily comportment that continue to reinforce and sustain white hegemony and mythos" (37). Within the white imaginary, the image of the black body as a criminal is so internalized that it can never be seen as innocent and is made responsible for the mistakes of the white person.

Like in *THUG*, the media coverage frames Manny and Justyce as thugs as it arranges the narrative to fit its predetermined conclusion: black people are threats. The news construes the juveniles as the agents of violence; however, their agency "is phantasmatically implied as the narrative precedent and antecedent to the frames that are shown" (Butler, *Reading* 16). Thus, the white imaginary creates a narrative that confirms its racist image of the black individual as somebody who is always threatening. The media publishes a picture of Justyce's and his schoolmates' stereotypical costumes from the Halloween party. However, everyone except for Justyce dressing as "Thug Extraordinaire" (148) is blurred in the picture. Thereby, the media decides "what is seen," which, according to Butler, creates not a neutral perception but "a racial formation" that is "hegemonic and forceful" (*Reading* 16-17). Thus, the media manifests the "racial production of the visible" and shows its way of "seeing" as the "truth." The anchor refers to Justyce's contradictory identities to prove that "this kid was leading a double life" (Stone, *DM* 148). Hence, the protagonist is positioned within the negative context his mother advised him to resist. The media's racist bias becomes apparent when the black body, thus the criminal

body, is positioned as irremediably trapped within the field of criminality and danger: “You know what they say, Steven: you can remove the kid from the thug life... But ya can’t remove the thug life from the kid.” Justyce is positioned within a normative space that determines how he is ‘seen’ but gives him no opportunity to define himself. Hence, the media create their own narrative of the incident and rearrange the circumstances so that their dominant worldview, which associates blackness with danger, is consolidated.

As a further parallel to the other two novels, people sympathize with the officer instead of mourning the black body he killed. A solidarity rally is held in the police officer’s honor with people wearing T-Shirts and signs with his face that read: “Race-Baiting Should Be a Crime” and “Protector not Poster Child” (131). As the black body can never be completely bereft of its negative connotations evoking danger, the white perpetrator is therefore put into the position of the victim instead. Doc explains how the white imaginary serves to create an understanding and arrangement of the world such that assumptions are confirmed, and fears concealed:

[...] people need the craziness in the world to make some sort of sense to them. That idiot ‘pundit’ would rather believe you and Manny were thugs than believe a twenty-year veteran cop made a snap judgment based on skin color. He identifies with the cop. If the cop is capable of murder, it means he’s capable of the same. He can’t accept that. (151)

Thus, within the normative space that attributes innocence and purity to whiteness, a white person as the agent of violence is so remote from white American ideas that people would rather deny the facts and rearrange them so that their accustomed order is reestablished: the black individuals, although they are teenagers, – and not the white individual – are threatening. Accepting the white person as murderer would mean confounding the prevalent image of the innocent white, and thus bereaving the white individual of their privileged status that more often than not grants them more respectability than a person of color. As Doc elaborates, white people need the black person to be flawed in order for the positive norms surrounding the white person to remain undeterred: “But these people have to justify Garrett’s actions. They *need* to believe you’re a bad guy who got what he deserved in order for their world to keep spinning the way it always has.” Baldwin observes that “those who believed that they could control and define Black people divested themselves of the power to control and define themselves” (*White* 180). Thus, in order not to disrupt the dominant discourse that secures whiteness as invisible, that is to say reinforces its status as natural, parts of the truth must be hidden, or, in the case of Justyce, distorted in a way so that the white person is again seen as innocent (see Yancy 58).

Moreover, at court, the defense attorney’s internalized biased assumptions about black people are revealed when she interrogates Justyce about Manny’s shooting. She consolidates

the image of the two teenagers as thugs as she employs words from the semantic field of violence in her phrasing and turns the boys into the agents of violence: Justyce and Manny “*attacked*,” “*assaulted*,” “*hit*” and “*were threatening*” (186-89) other people, which leads her to the conclusion that both juveniles “had a history of responding violently to perceived verbal slights” (190). As a tactical ploy deflecting from Officer Tison’s culpability, the attorney makes use of the racist schema that perceives the black body as threat and thereby “splits the violent intention off from the body who wields it and attributes it to the body who receives it” (Butler, *Reading* 20). Justyce’s counterarguments, as for instance the fact that Tison was off duty when he shot Manny, are immediately undermined by the attorney. Moreover, she tries to justify the perpetrator’s action by emphasizing the misconduct of Justyce and Manny, as for example their violation of the ordinance prohibiting noise disturbance and their alleged threatening gestures. In this manner she creates a narrative of the incident which fits into the white imaginary, coupling blackness with immorality and criminality. Thus, violence is projected upon the black body, which is made the trigger, the agent as well as the bearer of violence: it becomes the “phantasm of white aggression, a phantasm that *belongs* to that white aggression as the externalized figure of its own distortion.”

As demonstrated in all these novels alike, emphasizing negative traits of black victims to justify police officers’ actions is a common response by the media and white people as they try to whitewash police brutality. As shown by Smiley and Fakunle, this reaction has also been observed outside of literary realms after the deaths of unarmed victims like Michael Brown and Eric Garner. These assumptions can ultimately engender racial discrimination and racial profiling.

#### **4.2.3. The Racial Production of the Visible**

Although Justyce thinks of himself as diligent student, he realizes that success does not exempt him from racial discrimination. The protagonist becomes a victim of racial profiling when he intends to drive his drunk ex-girlfriend Melo, who is half-black with rather fair skin, home at night. Seeing the approaching police, Justyce’s first reaction is to protect the girl from problems with the law: “He wants it to be *clear* to the cop that she wasn’t gonna drive so she won’t be in even worse trouble” (7). It is, however, not Melo but he himself whom the police officer, Tomás Castillo, targets, brutally seizing and handcuffing him. The protagonist realizes the absurdity of the situation, the black body being condemned for the mistakes of others: “Melo’s drunk beyond belief in the backseat of a car she fully intended to drive, yet *Jus* is the one in handcuffs.” Justyce is racially profiled by Castillo, his blackness immediately triggering the association of



a threat. As Fanon puts it, “[t]he black man is a ‘phobogenic’ object, provoking anxiety” (129). Much like in the other two novels, the black body is reduced to its dangerous connotations and condemned by the white gaze, which operates not as “simple seeing, an act of direct perception, but [as] the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to ‘see’” (Butler, *Reading* 16). What Castillo ‘sees’ is a black body, any black body, which in his perception is sufficient evidence of criminality. Moreover, the officer’s field of vision is shaped by the white racist episteme, which perceives the white body as helpless and endangered when confronted with the black body (16-19). Although Melo is half-black, she is seen as the “white girl” (Stone, *DM* 8) by the police officer, which automatically renders her pure and innocent, and thus threatened by the proximity of the black body.

Castillo’s assumptions about Justyce are further reinforced by the latter’s actions and the officer’s internalized prejudicial stereotypes. Apart from his skin color, Justyce’s clothes serve as evidence for his criminality: “I knew your punk ass was up to no good when I saw you walking down the road with that goddamn hood on.” This is reminiscent of Trayvon Martin’s killing, whose wearing of a hoodie made him accountable for his death.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Castillo holds racist prejudices about black people and generalizes their behavior: “I know your kind: punks like you wander the streets of nice neighborhoods searching for prey.” By referring to “punks like you,” the officer deplores a whole group of people and assumes criminality before the crime. Such a way of seeing renders Justyce’s innocent act of walking as threatening as his criminality is always already implied by his skin color. Even though Justyce obeys the officer’s commands and acts compliantly, Castillo calls for backup and construes the black body’s vulnerability as his own. He develops what Butler calls “white paranoia,” which is “the projection of their own aggression, and the subsequent regarding of that projection as an external threat” (*Reading* 19). Hence, by depriving Justyce of his vulnerability, which can be seen as a “precondition for humanization” (Butler, *Life* 43), the police officer dehumanizes him and renders him essentially threatening.

This incident of racial profiling makes Justyce aware of the dangers he is exposed to as a black boy in America and the fact “that people look at me and see a threat instead of a human being” (Stone, *DM* 95). He is confronted with his own bias against black people from poor neighborhoods as he describes Shemar Carson’s, a victim of police brutality, “thuggish appearance” and reassures himself that he doesn’t “come across as ‘threatening’” (12). He realizes that his success at school does not exempt him from the burdens of racism as he writes

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<sup>13</sup> The talk show host and juror Geraldo Rivera made Trayvon Martin responsible for his death as he published tweets saying: “His hoodie killed Trayvon Martin as surely as George Zimmermann” (Fung).

that “I thought if I made sure to be an upstanding member of society, I’d be exempt from the stuff THOSE black guys deal with,” referring to Carson. When yet another unarmed black teenager dies at the hands of police brutality, he leads a conversation about the imminent danger of police violence to their own lives with Manny as black people are “gettin’ shot for carrying candy and cell phones” (89). It is here that he realizes his inherent threatening nature, constituted in the white racist imaginary.

Justyce again becomes the victim of racial profiling when he and Manny listen to loud music in their car and stop next to police officer Tison at the traffic light, whose gaze “reminds him a *little* too much of The Incident” (117), meaning his first experience of racial profiling. As Manny asserts, “I bet he’s totally profiling us right now. Probably thinks we’re drug dealers or something.” Thus, the officer’s white gaze, influenced by racist myths, perceives their black bodies as a disturbance to his white being (see Yancy 12). Tison blatantly expresses his racist bias as he screams racial slurs at them: “*YOU WORTHLESS NIGGER SONS OF BITCHES!*” (118). Justyce and Manny are accustomed to the white gaze policing and controlling their black bodies, but, as Manny claims, he is “done bending over backwards to appease white people.” However, by denying the white gaze to determine the actions of his black body, he pays with his life.

Hence, the question that reverberates in Justyce’s mind throughout the novel is: “How different would things have gone had I not been a black guy?” (12). The debate group at school afford an opportunity to reflect on racial injustice and express his opinion on the matter. At the state debate tournament, Justyce and his debate partner Sarah-Jane directly address the issue of racial profiling in order to draw people’s attention to prevailing injustices. Although the protagonist is hesitant in fear of becoming “the black guy accused of ‘playing the race card’ at a state tournament” (79), Sarah-Jane’s ambition to awaken society finally convinces him that “if we can get some facts out there, maybe make people *think* a little bit, it’ll be worth it.” Thus, realizing that “he *needed* to talk about this in a public forum” (80), Justyce comes to see that addressing racial injustices is more important than white people’s accusations of playing the race card.

#### **4.2.4. The Lived Experiences of the Black Individual**

While Justyce’s schoolmates are adamant that racial equality is ensured in today’s society, the protagonist finds himself repeatedly confronted with racial microaggression. Microaggression is particularly harmful as perpetrators often fail to notice their discriminatory behavior and tend to dismiss their microaggressive actions (Friedlaender 6). Justyce especially finds himself

confronted with unintentional forms of racially microaggressive behavior, namely microinvalidation, which is the negation of a person's racial experience through verbal comments or behavior, and microinsults, which are expressed through comments or behaviors that demean an individual's racial heritage identity (Sue and Sue 111-12).

A common microinvalidation is the idea of the post-racial, colorblind society, which is internalized by white characters from *THUG* and *AAB*, as well as by Justyce's schoolmates. As Jared asserts, "[t]his is a color-blind society, my brethren... people are judged by the content of their character instead of the color of their skin" (32). Clearly, the protagonist's experiences with racial profiling tell him otherwise. The notion of colorblindness thus undermines the influence of race on society, negates a person's racial background, and allows white people to avoid confronting their own color-determined prerogative (Sue and Sue 270). Moreover, to prove America's colorblindness, Kyle negates Manny's skin color: "Like I totally don't even see you as black, Manny!" (33). While the comment is not intended to hurt, Kyle signifies that he does not acknowledge Manny's racial experiences and therefore the discrimination he is exposed to as a black individual. Nullifying other people's racial background only reinforces the violence inflicted upon them by society as racial injustices are dismissed and remain unquestioned.

Moreover, Jared tries to assert that racial equality has been achieved in the United States. He claims that "anyone born here is a citizen with full rights" and takes Manny's rich family as prove for the nonexistence of racial inequality: "Black people have the same opportunities as white people in this country if they're willing to work hard enough. Manny's parents are a perfect example" (24-25). Thereby, Jared denies the existence of racial discrimination and the debilitating lack of opportunity for African Americans. Sarah-Jane attempts to illustrate people's implicit bias towards black people as she compares the situation of Jared and Manny: "You and Manny, who are equal in pretty much every way apart from race, could commit the same crime, but it's almost guaranteed that he would receive a harsher punishment than you" (28). However, Jared replies with yet another microaggressive comment: "Maybe I get away with it because I'm not dumb enough to get caught" (29), implying intellectual inferiority, which is a form of microinvalidation (Sue and Sue 123).

The effects of Jared's uncritical stance on racial injustices can be seen with the example of the killing of Shemar Carson. After the announcement that the officer will not be arrested despite the fact that he killed a teenager, Jared does not question the court's decision but merely sees the verdict as a prove of the white person's innocence: "Not every white person who kills a black person is guilty of a crime" (27). He then refers to Carson's own background to justify

his guilt and consequent death: “[T]he guy’d been arrested before. You don’t get arrested if you’re not doing anything wrong. Bottom line, he was a criminal.” However, Jared disregards that Carson’s crime, a misdemeanor possession of marijuana, was an offence that he frequently commits himself. The naive idea of the colorblind United States is so entrenched in his mind that he accepts the court’s verdicts unquestioned and fails to see his own white privilege that allows him to escape from such misdemeanor without consequences.

In Justyce’s white friends’ efforts to prove that racial inequality is overcome in the United States, they, albeit unconsciously, engage in overtly racist actions. When the schoolmates dress up as different stereotypes for Halloween in order to make “this massive political statement about racial equality and broken barriers” (39), Blake wears a Klansman costume and gives the Nazi salute. Justyce is shocked by his friend’s insensitive treatment of history: his schoolmates fail to see how certain events of the past are still hurtful today and should not be ridiculed in the present. Furthermore, they misunderstand the harmful effects of blackfacing.<sup>14</sup> Jared and Kyle talk about a theater play in eighth-grade in which Jared had to play Martin Luther King, Jr. and wore brown makeup. They take this anecdote as an example of America’s equality: “See, things really are equal nowadays, bro. A white kid can play a famous black dude in a play, and it’s no big deal” (32). Hence, they fail to see the historical meaning of blackfacing, which served to ridicule and dehumanize black people in minstrel shows in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and misunderstand its impact. Moreover, when Blake talks about “my niggas” (90) and is reprimanded by Justyce for “tossin’ the n-word around like you own it” (91), Blake corrects him: “You don’t own it any more than I do, bro.” He does not realize that a word that was historically used to humiliate a group of people is hurtful for concerned individuals. Both the blackfacing and the use of the N-word demonstrate that Justyce’s friends are oblivious to their white privilege that allows them to do and say whatever they deem right. In the words of Coates, “[w]hen you’re white in this country, you’re taught that everything belongs to you. You think you have a right to everything” (qtd. in FAN). So Jared, Blake, and Kyle fail to see the real harm of historically racist actions for African Americans and their white privilege that allows them to paint their skin brown or use the N-word without feeling any consequences. The danger of their actions lies in their inability to realize that their behavior is racist and only perpetuates racial injustices.

When Jared brings up the topic of affirmative action in the debate class, he engages in microinsult. After Justyce is accepted into Yale, Jared proposes a debate topic: “I’d like to

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on blackfacing in Minstrel Shows see Frank W. Sweet, “A History of the Minstrel Show.”

discuss how affirmative action discriminates against members of the majority” (59). Given his own relegation to the waiting list, Jared assumes that other ‘minority’ students like Justyce were only accepted as Yale has to fill a quota: “I know for a fact it’s because I’m white and he’s black.” Lashing out, Jared questions Justyce’s intelligence, claiming that “there’s no way he got a thirty-four” (60) on the ACT, as well as the intellect of other minorities: “All I know is that no matter what college I end up at, when I see a minority, I’m gonna wonder if they’re qualified to be there” (64). By doubting the minority’s intelligence, Jared demeans Justyce’s racial heritage, which is a common expression of microinsult (Sue and Sue 111). As Sarah-Jane observes, “it negates his assumption that because he’s white and you’re black, he’s more intelligent than you are” (60). Thus, oblivious to his white privilege that allows him to attend a prestigious high school, he feels treated unfairly and makes minorities responsible for his failure to succeed.

Justyce’s efforts to draw his friends’ awareness to the harm of their remarks and behaviors only cause them to discount their microaggression, which is yet another form of microaggressive behavior, and accuse him of being sensitive. Instead of conceding their own mistakes, they reproach Justyce for interpreting supposedly harmless actions as racist. As Justyce’s friends consider themselves as liberal people who believe in equality, they find it difficult to see past their own biased racial attitudes. Hence, the danger of racial microaggression lies in its invisibility and easy dismissal. Whites’ self-given ‘right’ to define racist acts is yet another way of exercising their power to negate blacks’ perceptions and ascribe ultimate truth to their own observations (Yancy 62). While microaggressive behaviors might seem inoffensive, their cumulative effect can be very harmful as they “affect individuals psychologically, behaviorally, socially, and physiologically, and serve to reinforce the very structural oppression that produces them” (Friedlaender 7). Microaggression can be stressful for the members of the oppressed group and causes self-doubt, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness and invisibility. The denial of such subtle forms of racism only contributes to their detrimental effects (Sue and Sue 119). Justyce experiences frustration when reflecting on Jared’s microinsult: “I’m gonna be paranoid about people looking at me and wondering if *I’m* qualified to be there” (66). Thus, the protagonist feels devalued by his peers because of his racial background. Yet the cumulative experiences of microaggressive behavior influence how concerned individuals see themselves and the world through the effects of “mental colonization” and “indoctrination”:

Since it is the socialization into white supremacist thinking, the internalization of racial self-hatred, that is the psychological groundwork which prepares many black folks to

see themselves as always and only victims, it is further mental colonization to then blame the individuals who succumb to powerful forces of indoctrination, most obviously mass media, and see themselves as victims. (hooks, *Soul* 78)

The experience of microaggression can lead to individuals devaluing their racial background as a response to cumulative racist remarks. Hence, calling them sensitive only negates the existence of microaggression and further leads to the internalization of “negative emotional responses, such as shame or anxiety, as targets still believe, albeit mistakenly, that the acts were about them as individuals” (Friedlaender 9). The danger of microaggression can also be observed with the example of Manny, who engages in microaggression himself by calling Justyce “way too sensitive” (93) when the latter makes him aware of their friends’ disrespectful behavior. He clearly does not see the harms of their subtle racist behavior. However, when he is called sensitive himself by Jared, he realizes the danger of microaggression and his friends’ ignorance: “Them fools don’t wanna hear when they’re being offensive. They couldn’t care less what it’s like to live in our skin” (109). Thus, he comprehends the detrimental effects of microaggressive behavior, which often remains invisible when not directly addressed or when discounted by the perpetrator.

Justyce’s schoolmates’ refusal to acknowledge their microaggressive behaviors demonstrates their ignorance with regard to the racist experiences of African Americans. Friedlaender talks about the “genuine ignorance” (11) of people committing microaggression, in which case microaggressions are unconscious acts and their “[i]ndividual ignorance is produced by the broader structural conditions under which the agent is acting.” Just like Manny, the perpetrators might not be aware of their harmful actions and need critical reflection in order to discern their detrimental effects. However, innocence does not excuse harmful behaviors, as noted by Baldwin: “It is the innocence which constitutes the crime” (*Fire* 10). Thus, even though white ignorance might be structurally produced, and some people might not genuinely be aware of their injurious behavior, they are accountable for their actions. Baldwin elaborates:

They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. (13)

In the case of Justyce’s friends, they refuse to see their microaggressive behaviors even though they are repeatedly made aware of them by Sarah-Jane: “I know you’d prefer to ignore this stuff because you *benefit* from it, but walking around pretending inequality doesn’t exist won’t make

it disappear” (28). Hence, Sarah-Jane directly confronts them with their white ignorance, which not only reinforces white people’s privileged status but also perpetuates racial inequality.

The white schoolmates’ microaggressive comments and behaviors demean African Americans’ racial background whilst insidiously evading explicit racism; and yet priding themselves on living in a colorblind society, they remain oblivious to black people’s experiences of racial discrimination. Likewise, Hailey from *THUG* engages in microaggressive behavior without realizing and denies her racist remarks. Thereby, these characters negate but also reinforce inequalities between black and white.

#### 4.2.5. Talking Back to History

In order to make sense of the racial discrimination Justyce is confronted with, he starts writing letters to Martin Luther King, Jr. Addressing letters to this historic role model serves as a coping mechanism for the daily injustices he experiences.

For the protagonist, King is not only a person he looks up to but also someone he identifies with in a predominantly white society. Thus, he refers to him by his first name as “it feels most natural to interact with you as a homie” (10). Writing helps him put himself in King’s shoes and to reflect on his daily discriminatory experiences.

I need to pay more attention, Martin. Start really *seeing* stuff and writing it down. Figure out what to do with it. That’s why I’m writing to you. You faced way worse shi – I mean *stuff* than sitting in handcuffs for a few hours, but you stuck to your guns [...]. I wanna try to live like you. Do what you would do. See where it gets me. (13)

The letters help Justyce to come to terms with African American history and draw upon the past to manage racial discrimination of the present. Doc challenges his debate group students to think critically about equality as he writes the United States Declaration of Independence on the board: “all men are created equal.” The quote sparks a vivid discussion about racial equality and ultimately leads back to the question of humanity. As the students observe, examining the sentence within its historical context, the quote did not necessarily mean that all people were treated equally when it came to slavery and women’s rights. Today, the rampant police brutality shows that people are still not perceived as equals, as Sarah-Jane explains, “nobody sees *us* [white people] and automatically assumes we’re up to no good. We’ll never be seen as criminal before we’re seen as people” (28). In his letter to King, Justyce draws a parallel to the shooting of Carson, who “was straight-up denied his ‘inalienable rights’” (35). Thus, just like slaves were denied their rights and considered socially dead by their masters, black people are killed at the hands of police officers today without being arrested for a similar reason: they are too

often perceived as socially dead, as mentioned by Orlando Patterson, and so their lives are not seen as valuable by society. Justyce continues to draw parallels between the past and the present in his letters to King, marking the prevailing injustices:

I did the math when I got back to my room: there were 192 years between the Declaration of Independence and the end of all that Jim Crow stuff. Now we're over a decade into the twenty-first century, and I know from experience people like me are still getting shafted. (35)

Although reflecting upon history is painful for Justyce, only through his confrontation with the past can he see prevalent racial discrimination and develop an understanding of the problems African Americans face today. Writing empowers Justyce to counteract racial inequality and drawing on Martin Luther King, Jr. gives him hope to continue his struggle.

However, after Manny's death, Justyce ceases writing letters to King as his "'experiment' obviously didn't work" (150). The fact that no matter how good a person he tries to be, the world barely changes and still sees African Americans as thugs, discourages him, as "despite how good of a dude Martin was, they still killed him" (151). When he is already in Yale, he writes one more letter to King, reflecting on what initially moved him to start the project and why he stopped. He realizes that he always asked himself the wrong question:

Every challenge I've faced, it's been *What would Martin do?* and I could never come up with a real answer. But if I go with Doc's thinking – *Who would Martin BE?* – well, that's easy: you'd be yourself. THE eminent MLK: nonviolent, not easily discouraged, and firm in your beliefs.

And maybe that's my problem: I haven't really figured out who I am or what I believe yet. (202)

Thus, he understands that he has to find out for himself what he believes in and who he wants to be. Nevertheless, King continues to give him hope as Justyce finds a letter the activist addressed to the Atlanta Constitution, advocating for equal rights of all American citizens. He wrote the letter when he was the same age as the protagonist, which "gives me hope that maybe I've got some time to figure things out." Although the experiment did not necessarily help Justyce "get more respect" or "be 'more acceptable'" (201), it helped him understand the long-lasting struggles of African Americans, process the racial injustices he experienced, and thereby continue to develop his own way of fighting against inequality.

The author's reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. is particularly powerful as BLM has often been negatively compared to the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>15</sup> However, while remembering

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<sup>15</sup> The former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee assumes that King would be "appalled" (qtd. in Bradner) by the strategy of BLM and CNN's Wolf Blitzer saw the protests in Baltimore as not conforming to the "tradition of Martin Luther King" (qtd. in Theoharis), both criticisms notably coming from a white person.



King's nonviolent protest strategy, people often forget that the Civil Rights Movement was also seen as disruptive at the time. In her own letter to Martin Luther King, Jr., Nic Stone appeals for the remembrance of the Civil Rights Movement as it was perceived at its heights, claiming that "we recall 'nonviolent' and 'civil', but forget the *disobedience*" (*Author*). Hence, Stone makes people aware of the distorted image of the Civil Rights Movement that is highly praised for its nonviolence today but used to meet with similar criticism as BLM: "We've clearly forgotten you were told the same thing. That your protests were met with opposition in the form of firebombs, dogs, fire hoses." Thus, King also appealed to people to protest against racial discrimination. Despite his nonviolent strategy, he was also considered a criminal, or a thug so-to-speak. As he states, protests, which are "the language of the unheard" (*Chaos* 119), are necessary for change: "I am not sad that black Americans are rebelling; this was not only inevitable but eminently desirable" (*Testament* 313). Just like the Civil Rights Movement aimed at equal rights for all American citizens, BLM still calls for the equal treatment of both black and white. Thus, King's words are as relevant today as they were during the Civil Rights Movement.

### **4.3. Analysis of *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely**

#### **4.3.1. All-American Ideals**

As the title of the novel indicates, *AAB* centers around American values and the question of what exactly makes somebody "American." Set in a town called Springfield, which has increasingly become more diverse, the white population falling from 84 percent to 37 percent over the past thirty years, the town tries to uphold patriotism and whatever it understands under American values. The notion of "Americanness" is critically explored through the perspective of the white boy Quinn and the black boy Rashad, who are citizens of the United States but not necessarily both accepted as true Americans by society.

The military is framed as representing an essential part of American culture and serves as a way to express loyalty to the United States. Quinn's father, who was killed as a soldier in the war in Afghanistan, is celebrated as a hero in the wake of his death. Dying for his own country and so proving his loyalty for the country grants him utmost respectability and makes him an "instant saint" (27). Consequently, people have high expectations of Quinn and want him to embody the same loyalty his father did. Loyalty represents a fundamental American value he is expected to strive towards: "*Your dad was loyal to the end, they'd all tell me. Loyal*

*to his country, loyal to his family*" (267). Quinn's father also serves as a role model for other law enforcement officers like the officer who beat Rashad, Paul Galluzzo, who hails him as a "hero" (266). Likewise, Rashad's father, having served for the army as well, highly praises the military, which represents a way to live up to American standards to him: "There's no better opportunity for a black boy in this country than to join the army" (8). Trying to meet his father's expectations, Rashad joins the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), a college program which gives students the opportunity to experience the army while attending school. Thus, both teenagers attempt to conform to American ideals of their families as good as possible.

However, the novel also provides a critical stance on American patriotism. After Quinn's father is celebrated as a hero, Quinn realizes that his father's image is distorted by people's projection of the American ideals on him. While he also sees his father as a hero, he praises him not for being a soldier but "because of the person he was" (266). Hence, he strives to be like his father in the sense that the latter fought for his beliefs: "But it wasn't about loyalty. It was about him standing up for what he believed in. And I wanted to be my dad's son. Someone who believed a better world was possible – someone who stood up for it" (267). Reflecting on Galluzzo, who represented a father figure for him after his own father's death, Quinn comes to understand that the vocation as a police officer alone does not award him with American values: "Becoming a cop would not make him a hero – but what kind of cop he became could have" (266). Loyalty and heroism does not necessarily implicate dying for one's country but fighting for a better society. Thus, the institutions of police and military are represented in an ambivalent way: they represent American values, yet they can also be a source of violence and prejudice. This ambivalence is also exemplified in the novel: on the one hand, Quinn's father was killed fighting the war in Afghanistan and thus died as a hero in the battlefield; on the other, in the United States, innocent people are beaten and shot by law enforcement officers, who do not have to fear a trial because of their high status within the American society. Rashad grapples with the fact that his father, his "model of discipline and courage" (234), shot at the unarmed African American Darnell Shackleford when he still worked as a police officer. While the police are highly praised for embodying fundamental American values, they are not exempt from their own violence they inflict upon innocent individuals.

As both protagonists try to live according to what are perceived as American values, they start to walk their own path toward their different opinions on what it means to be an "All-American" boy. Being the son of a fallen soldier, Quinn is naturally thought of as "the dutiful son, the All-American boy" (27). Moreover, his appearance, which is similar to his father's,

makes him All-American: “Apparently, I had his eyes. His build. His ‘All-American’ looks” (28). However, he demonstrates the delusion of the idea of “All-American” when he admits having already stolen alcohol from Jerry’s, the shop where Rashad is accused of shoplifting, and smoked marijuana. Thus, he shows that a supposedly All-American appearance does not reveal his character: “I’m thinking all this, but on the outside, I was all smiles and handshakes – All-American” (37). On the other hand, Rashad, who thinks of himself as “not the stealing type” (18), is accused of shoplifting although there is no proof, merely because of his looks that make him the criminal more easily than an “All-American” boy like Quinn. The party at the beginning of the novel, which both Rashad and Quinn intend to attend, symbolizes the latter’s white privilege: although Quinn steals alcohol from his mother, he ends up going to the party, while Rashad’s encounter with the police prevents him from partying. Evident is that Quinn’s white skin allows him to escape from misdemeanors like stealing, while Rashad’s black skin immediately associates him with criminality. Although the black boy tries to be a moral American citizen, he is not recognized as All-American. His black skin excludes him from the idea of “Americanness.” Hence, race and not character primarily defines who is perceived as All-American.

While Rashad strives to be a respectable American citizen, he realizes that acting responsibly does not prevent him from racial injustice. Advocating for military and American values, his father embraces respectability politics.<sup>16</sup> He advises his sons to assimilate into mainstream standards by joining the army and dressing as is considered appropriate: “Dad was all about discipline and believed that if you work hard, good things happen to you no matter what. Of course, part of working hard, to him, was looking the part, dressing the part, and speaking the part” (51). However, resisting hegemonic standards, Rashad’s elder brother Spoony is reprimanded by his father: “*Why can’t you get a haircut? Why can’t you dress like a respectable adult? Why can’t you set an example for your brother?*” (52). Trying to adhere to white standards, the father constantly sees his self, or, in this case, his sons, “through the eyes of others” (Du Bois 7), that is, through the white gaze. His image of a respectable person is

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<sup>16</sup> The term “respectability politics” was initially coined by Evelyn Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, published in 1993. According to Higginbotham, in the nineteenth century, respectability politics emphasized the “reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations” (187) and was seen as “uplift politics.” The politics of respectability allowed African Americans to redefine themselves and change their image in a positive way. While on the one hand it served as a form of resistance to the negative stereotypes about African Americans’ morals, it simultaneously reinforced “oppression by adhering to hegemonic standards of what it means to be respectable” (Patton 731). As the guidelines of what it means to be “respectable” are orientated at racialized, gendered, and class-based standards, respectability politics only perpetuate white normativity. The term is frequently used today, in many cases to make people of color who do not adhere to what is perceived as mainstream standards aware of their misdemeanor.

dictated by white standards. Accordingly, the father constantly seeks the recognition of whites, which, as noted by Starkey, has the consequence that “if whites think poorly of black folk, blacks most probably will think poorly of themselves, too. Yet if blacks live within an oppressive climate that inhibits the development of a positive racial identity, then pursuing a strategy that also inhibits a positive racial identity matters little.” The dangers of the uncritical adherence to responsibility politics can be seen with regard to the father’s history of police brutality: when confronted with both a white and a black teenager, he chose to shoot an innocent black boy because he immediately assumed the one who “was dressed like your [Rashad’s] brother” (231) to be the criminal. Thus, the father harbors implicit bias about black people himself.

In times where attention is increasingly brought to police brutality, the notion of respectability politics has emerged as the hallmark of political discussions revolving around African Americans. What was once a concept of the black elite to uplift people of color by allowing them to correct wrong images about the black community is now employed to reprimand black individuals who do not act according to white standards and blame them for their non-conformity to white normativity (F. Harris). This can be observed in the reactions to killings and beatings of African Americans by police officers. Instead of accusing the perpetrator, the victims are made responsible for their own deaths or injuries due to their alleged misbehavior, as for instance wearing a hoodie.<sup>17</sup> However, in many cases, “acting responsibly” also does not save black individuals’ lives, as can be seen in the numerous unjustifiably killed black people. As noted by Stafford: “The reason why being ‘respectable’ doesn’t work is because no matter how respectable you may be acting, your performance isn’t undoing the very real systematic ways in which our world operates.” Thus, black individuals are always vulnerable to violence as long as systemic racism remains.<sup>18</sup> The novel, which was written as a reaction to Trayvon Martin’s death (Grigsby Bates), challenges responsibility politics in the sense that Rashad, who strives to be a dutiful American citizen, is not spared racial

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<sup>17</sup> President Obama has often been criticized for embracing responsibility politics, as for example by Ta-Nehisi Coates, who argues that the idea that “black responsibility is at least part of the ‘race problem’ is widely shared among black America’s most prominent figures” (*Plague*), including the president, and contends that Obama obliges black people who are “never tired of hearing [...] another discourse on the lack of black morality or on the failings of black culture” (*Policy*).

<sup>18</sup> BLM challenges responsibility politics and tries to expand the idea of what it means to be respectable. Instead of the “traditional, charismatic Black messiah model that typically privileged straight male leadership and top-down, hierarchical infrastructures” (Chang 109), the movement is led by three pro-queer feminists, who try to centralize people on the margins of society. They refuse to adhere to patriarchal structures and white standards but instead call for the acceptance of diversity and black humanity.

discrimination. Thus, responsibility politics only detract from the real causes of issues like police brutality:

Instead, believing that our lives only matter when we ‘act right’ only fuels the very dangerous ways in which our world operates. It protects the structural racism that no one ever wants to talk about or challenge. And it inevitably makes you believe that your life depends on a well enunciated “yes, sir.” (Stafford)

Hence, both protagonists only come to understand that internalizing and incorporating American values does not spare black individuals, who are not automatically associated with those ideals, from violence when Rashad experiences unjust beatings himself. Only his brutal confrontation with racism and Quinn’s witness to it makes them realize the ambivalence of respectability politics, as explained by Stafford: “And in the end, all respectability does is make you ignore that target placed on your back until the day they pull the trigger and shoot.”

#### **4.3.2. Silence: White Privileged Ignorance**

The status of the “All-American” teenager affords Quinn an advantage that not only prevents him from being seen as a criminal, but also allows him a certain obliviousness of racial injustices. Thus, his first reaction to Rashad’s beating is ignorance.

Sullivan talks about white privilege as unconscious habit to show how oppressive structures are consolidated in people’s minds. Habits manifest themselves in the individual and allow them to act without really thinking about whatever it is they are doing. Hence, unconscious habits can also limit an individual by enabling harmful behaviors to operate unquestioned (4). According to Sullivan, white privilege is one such an unconscious habit, which “operates as nonexistent and actively works to disrupt attempts to reveal its existence” (1). Thus, white privilege often remains invisible, which reinforces existing oppressive structures.

After Quinn and his friends Dwyer and Guzzo witness the officer’s assault, they decide to turn a blind eye to the incident. The boys pretend they have not seen anything and are “telling ourselves we were tough as balls and that what happened outside Jerry’s was nothing. It wasn’t on our minds, we kept telling each other. No big deal. NBD” (61). Thus, their whiteness gives them the privilege to escape the world of racism. However, their ignorance, which “operate[s] as a shield that protects a person from realizing their complicity in an oppressive situation” (Sullivan 128), only further contributes to racial inequality. When a video of the beating goes viral on social media and thus makes the incident visible to all people, Quinn still decides to ignore it: “No way I was watching that video. I wanted to erase the whole damn memory from

my mind” (124). In order to preserve his relationship with Galluzzo and his worldview that is shaped by a white imaginary that automatically links whiteness to innocence, he has to deny what he has seen and stay silent.

However, white silence not only surrounds the witnesses but also the protagonists’ basketball coach chief Killabrew. He tries to keep the basketball court strictly separate from the outside world, although Rashad’s beating clearly preoccupies all the team members. When he alludes to the beating, he does so without explicitly addressing race but advises his students to blot it out and instead advocates for team unity: “There’s all kinds of pressure going on out there, at school, in your lives back home. You leave it all at the door of this gym” (138). Although asserting “[t]hat is what I wanted to believe too” (139), Quinn expresses doubts about the possibility of being “one unit, one thing, no parts, one whole” (140), having “just one goal for one team” while “none of us thinking about race or racism, all of us color-blind and committed like evangelicals to the word ‘team’.” Chief Killabrew’s silencing of racial issues only reinforces white privilege, as explained by Sullivan: “White privileged ignorance, as I will call the ignorance that benefits and supports the domination of white people, does contribute to the racial privilege of white people” (18). Hence, Quinn later realizes the disingenuousness of chief Killabrew’s call for unity: “Team. Maybe? [...] We had to mean it to be it, and to be it maybe we had to talk about the tough shit out loud. Otherwise we’d just keep lying to each other all the time” (225). Thus, he comes to terms with the unconscious habit of his white privilege: while he subconsciously tried to ignore the fact that racial oppression concerns not only black people but the whole society, he comprehends how his white privilege not only protects but also implicates him in incidents of racial injustice.

Talking to Rashad’s friend English, Quinn is made aware of his white privilege that allows him to ignore and subconsciously makes him deny the realities of racial injustice. As English argues, “[w]hite boy like you can just walk away whenever you want. Everyone just sees you as Mr. All-American boy, and you can just keep on walking, thinking about other things. Just keep on living, like this shit don’t even exist” (176). Thus, Quinn is oblivious to his white privilege and displays white ignorance, which, according to Charles W. Mills, implies both false belief (error) and lack of true beliefs (ignorance) but is not necessarily based on bad faith (16-21). Mills argues that white ignorance makes people oblivious to their privileged status and other communities’ discriminatory experiences (17). Consequently, white people “exhibit a general inability to perceive the persistence of discrimination and the effects of more subtle forms of institutional discrimination” (Doane 14). White ignorance and white privilege can be seen as unconscious habits that reproduce the status-quo. Confronting Quinn with his racial

privilege makes him see his behavior from an outside perspective: “I thought about the guy who’d just said all those things to English. The guy who hadn’t meant to sound hurtful” (Reynolds and Kiely 178). He ultimately understands the safety of his privileged position he was afraid to lose: “And here’s what I realized I was saying beneath it all: I didn’t want my life to change from the way it was before I’d seen that.” His fixed worldview, shaped by his white privilege, is shaken as he is confronted with the realities of racial discrimination. Interrogating his white privilege, he acknowledges the difference between his black peers and himself:

Now I was thinking about how, if I wanted to, I could walk away and not think about Rashad, in a way that English or Shannon or Tooms or any of the guys at school who were not white could not. Even if they didn’t know Rashad, even if, for some reason, they hated Rashad, they couldn’t just ignore what happened to him; they couldn’t walk away. They were probably afraid, too. [...] But I didn’t have to be because my shield was that I was white. (180)

He realizes that Rashad’s experience with police brutality could happen to any other black individual as well; they are not protected by a “shield” like he is that provides him safety. His whiteness grants him the association of innocence, which means that in American society, he would always be seen “as just a ‘regular kid,’ an ‘All-American’ boy” rather than a criminal. Inhibited by white ignorance, white habit, and white privilege, he had shut racial inequality away: “I realized something worse: It wasn’t only that I could walk away – I already *had* walked away.” Thus, he gradually realizes his own complacency in racial injustice.

#### **4.3.3. Invisibility: “Was he invisible?”**

These instances of silence around Rashad’s beating ultimately render the victim invisible. Apart from chief Killabrew’s silencing of topics concerning race, teachers at school also carefully try to avoid talking about Rashad. Thus, his absence is not addressed in class. Mrs. Tracey is told to move on to another unit that does not involve topics about racism and Ms. Webber’s effort to teach a quiet class about noncontroversial issues only reinforces the tense atmosphere in the classroom. Despite acknowledging that she “know[s] there’s a student from our school who is in the hospital” (134), she avoids further discussions about the incident. Ms. Webber moves from silencing the topic to erasing Rashad’s name. He becomes an undetermined student who is not to be named. However, as noted by Butler, a subject is constituted through interpellation, as “it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible” (*Speech* 5). As the teacher strictly avoids Rashad’s name, there is no “recognition of existence” of the subject. Consequently, there is no subject, as it is through speech acts that “[o]ne comes to ‘exist’.” The students Molly and EJ try to bring their

schoolmate into recognition as they repeatedly pronounce his name and address the incident: “Rashad. [...] That’s his name. Rashad’s in the hospital” (135). However, their effort to raise attention to their friend’s fate is subverted as they are thrown out of the classroom. Through the teacher’s strict avoidance of Rashad from the classroom discourse, she erases him and denies his existence. As Butler observes, “we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition” (*Life* 44); however, “[t]he ‘I’ [...] cannot come into being without a ‘you’.” Thus, when individuals are not interpellated, they stay invisible and there is no possibility for recognition. The teachers therefore contribute to the derealization of Rashad’s life in refusing to acknowledge his absence.

The novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, which the students read in Mrs. Tracey’s class, gives them an opportunity to reflect on Rashad’s incident without explicitly mentioning it. The novel, published in 1952, metaphorically talks about invisibility to illustrate the situation of marginalized people whose plight has long been and still is overlooked. They are not being seen; that is, they are invisible:

I am an invisible man. [...] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. [...] When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me. [...] That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (Ellison 3)

Ellison’s notion of the inner eyes refers to the white racist episteme, through which white people ‘see’ the world and construct black subjectivity according to their imagination. Thus, the white person sees everything in the black person but not the black individual as they see themselves. Likewise, Rashad is turned into an invisible man as his name is erased and any discussion involving him is undermined. The white episteme decides to blur him out as what has happened to him cannot be explained through the white worldview. Drawing on Ellison’s concept of invisibility, Quinn questions the teachers’ silence: “[W]hy the hell shouldn’t our classes be talking about what happened to Rashad? Was what happened to him invisible? Was he invisible?” (215). Hence, he realizes how society systematically denies blacks’ lived experience of racism by erasing it from public discourse. The students powerfully thwart the boundaries of what should be said and what should remain silent as they each read a paragraph of *Invisible Man* aloud despite the teacher’s attempt to postpone the reading of the novel. Thereby, they demonstrate the danger of society’s silence around contentious issues for the individual, who is denied his existence, as well as society as a whole, which only reinforces prevailing injustices.

Quinn comes to realize how society and he himself continuously turn black individuals like Rashad invisible. He draws a parallel between two instances of American life where



citizens were brutally killed. 9/11 represents such a dramatic and distinctive event in the United States that everybody still remembers exactly where they were at the moment it happened. However, the countless killings of unarmed black individuals at the hands of police brutality are not stored in the collective memory of the United States but ignored and often forgotten, radically effaced. The successive loss of innocent black lives does not nearly count as much as the tragedy of 9/11. Thus, the lives of those black people are perceived as less grievable than of those who were remembered after 9/11. Quinn comprehends that he has always ignored the fate of innocently killed black people and contributed to their invisibility: “Where was *I* the year all these black American boys were lying in the streets?” (251). He fell prey to his white ignorance, which made him deny the reality of police brutality: “*That* was walking away. It was running away, for God’s sake. I. Ran. Away.” Quinn gradually realizes his personal complicity in the existing plight of African Americans.

His reflection on racial injustice opens questions about accountability and implicit racism. Quinn understands that despite whites’ efforts to make Rashad invisible, his racial experience was part of American life, thus of each individual American life as well: “[W]e couldn’t just separate basketball from the rest of our life, just like we couldn’t separate history from the present, just like we couldn’t have racism in America without racists” (256). Thus, denying African Americans’ situation in America means denying the United States’ reality. In a discussion with his friend Jill, Quinn realizes how denial is another form of racism and comes to terms with social as well as his individual racist actions. The protagonist articulates his feeling of helplessness: “I keep telling myself it isn’t my problem. But it is. It is my problem. I just don’t know what to do” (182). While the two friends reflect on the question as to “what *is* the problem,” Quinn realizes his difficulties of talking about racism upfront: “Why is it taking me five minutes to say the word racism?” (183). Thus, Jill makes him aware of his individual racism: “Maybe you’re racist?”, explaining that racism is not always explicit: “Not like KKK racist [...]. I don’t think most people think they’re racist. But every time something like this happens, you could, like you said, say, ‘Not my problem.’ [...] I think it’s all racism” (184). By expanding the idea of what is considered racist, Jill deconstructs structural racism and demonstrates that not-acting is yet another way of reinforcing existing discriminatory structures. Forcing Quinn to look in the mirror and consider racism not only on a social but also individual level makes him realize his way of seeing as he was “trying to stare so hard at my own two feet so I wouldn’t have to look up and see what was really going on” (185). Inhibited by his white worldview, he refused to see the imminent realities of racism, making the problems of minorities invisible. The white gaze only sees what it wants to see and what fits its white

episteme. Consequently, the black individuals are only visible when they act or are construed to act according to a white worldview. Understanding systemic racism, Quinn sees the way in which whiteness acts to obscure racial discrimination. Contrary to the other two novels, *AAB* illustrates a white boy's path from ignorance to critical examination of his white worldview through his internal focalization. Thereby, it is shown how his reflections ultimately galvanize him into actively supporting African Americans.

#### **4.3.4. Hypervisibility: “always a suspect”**

While Rashad is rendered invisible through white people's avoidance of his name, he simultaneously becomes hypervisible, in which case “the Black body still functions as unseen” but “becomes excessive” (Yancy 86). While invisibility endangers black individuals by denying their experiences or existence, hypervisibility subjects them to constant surveillance under the white gaze. Fanon describes the dual nature of black people's visibility: while invisibility creates “a feeling of not existing” (118), hypervisibility refers to his reflections on the lived experience of the black individual, who is “woven [...] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (91) by white people. Their white gaze fixes and defines black individuals according to the white imaginary, which leads Fanon to conclude that the black person is “overdetermined from the outside” (95). Consequently, there are “two distinct modalities of race: race as *erasure*, or as lived invisibility; and its appearance as *matter* in opposition to the universal subject position occupied by whiteness” (Richards 43). Thus, Rashad is always made hypervisible yet invisible by white people.

The black protagonist's hypervisibility becomes apparent when he is exposed to surveillance and control under the white gaze in the supermarket. Greeting the clerk upon entering the shop, the man eyes him skeptically: “He nodded suspiciously. Like he always did” (Reynolds and Kiely 17). His suspicion results in making Rashad a criminal as he projects his negative images and fears about black people onto the protagonist. “[F]ixing the scowl back on” (21) Rashad, he accuses the teenager of stealing. Within the white racist episteme, the black person always commits a crime. Drawing on his distorted image of African Americans, the clerk renders Rashad hypervisible and leaves him no chance to explain himself. Similarly, the police officer's white fear is projected onto the black body as he solely sees him as a threat when calling for backup, brutally beating him, and referring to black people as “[f]uckin' thugs” (23). Thus, Rashad's hypervisibility incessantly puts him at risk of violence, stirred by white paranoia.

Quinn also subconsciously harbors racial bias against black people as he cultivates fear toward them and engages in microaggression. Reflecting on an incident when Galluzzo brutally beat up a young African American of whom Quinn was afraid, he realizes his own and other people's white fear: his fear of elder black students, his neighbor's fear of black residents, and his mother's fear of "thugs": "Like the way Ma told me to cross the street to the other side of the sidewalk if I was walking home alone and I saw a group of guys walking toward me. Guys. That wasn't the word she used. Thugs. Fear of thugs" (132). White people's fear and their labeling of blacks as thugs makes African Americans hypervisible and only reinforces existing stereotypes framing them as threats. Moreover, Quinn engages in microaggression, which, as it is yet another form of harming blacks through stereotyping, contributes to blacks' hypervisibility. In an effort to defend Galluzzo in front of English, he invokes stereotypes about black people such as criminality and drugs to explain the beating: "Maybe he was on drugs" (174). Even though Quinn considers himself antiracist, he has internalized racist ideas about blacks. When he apologizes for his demeaning assumptions, English makes him aware of his pervasive biases: "Man, you have no idea how many times you've sounded like a dick. You think it was just today?" (177). Without realizing, he has engaged in microaggression, unconsciously harming Rashad and his friends. While Quinn can escape from the realities of racism, his black schoolmates are constantly exposed to the distress of microaggression.

Black people's hypervisibility can be further amplified through their representation in the media or on social media. People judge Rashad's appearance, saying that he "[l]ooks like he'd rob a store" or reading the sign on his ROTC uniform as a "gang sign" (278). Through the multiple misinterpretations of Rashad's character, he is overdetermined by the white gaze. However, Spoony, who has experienced racial profiling multiple times and thus knows the dangers of African Americans, who are "always a suspect" (60), attempts to control the narrative about Rashad that is spread on the news. He forwards the video of the beating to the news, tells his brother's name, and sends them a picture of Rashad in his ROTC uniform. Thus, he tries to prevent him from faulty judgements and narratives of the white gaze and transmits his version of the assault and Rashad: "I had to make sure we controlled as much of the narrative as possible. If I ain't send that photo in, they would've dug all through the Internet for some picture of you looking crazy" (94). He makes Rashad's experience visible without exposing him to hypervisibility. Thereby, he uses the power of visibility to African Americans' own advantage: "And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength" (Lorde, *Transformation* 42). In that sense, white people rendering blacks highly visible can endanger their existence; however, visibility can also serve as a

powerful source for black individuals to make others aware of their existence and control their narratives.

#### **4.3.5. Visibility: “#RashadIsAbsentAgainToday”**

As Rashad’s incident of police brutality yields diverging reactions from different people, rendering him simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, both protagonists as well as Rashad’s friends try to make his experience visible. Different ways of protesting allow them to draw attention to Rashad’s beating as well as the rampant police brutality directed at black people in general.

As a reaction to the teachers’ silence, students paint a striking graffiti tag on various places of the school building: “RASHAD IS ABSENT AGAIN TODAY” (165). The tag challenges people to break their silence and hampers white people’s escape from confrontations with racism. It yields the reactions it is aiming at as it stimulates conversations about Rashad’s beating: “Everybody was staring at it, taking photos of it, posing with it, and definitely talking about it.” Moreover, the tag particularly forces white people to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth of racial injustice. Quinn’s first reaction is ignorance: he tries “not to engage” and avoids looking at it. In a conversation with English, Quinn utters his doubts about the spray painting being too “extreme” (175), given the fact that Rashad is “not dead.” This conversation ultimately also makes Quinn realize his white privilege. Thus, the tag spurs dialogues about racism that allow people to reconsider their worldview. The graffiti tag yields responses from outside school as well and the phrase is tagged on multiple places throughout the city. Pictures are shared on various social media channels, driven by the hashtag “#RashadIsAbsentAgainToday” (198), and inspire people to speak up. Thus, the graffiti tag is the first form of protest as it dares to pronounce what is not being said and counteracts the invisibility of racial issues.

The role of white people in protesting for the black community’s rights can be observed with the example of Quinn, who moves from denial to racial solidarity. As Quinn realizes that he as a white person is part of the problems of African Americans, he decides to participate in the upcoming protest against police violence. To demonstrate his solidarity, he wears a T-Shirt at school, saying “I’M MARCHING” (252) on the front, “ARE YOU?” on the back. The shirt represents his first public declaration of solidarity for Rashad. Openly displaying his stance, he criticizes white people’s silence and tendency to deny their responsibility in racial issues. Moreover, advocating for Rashad means disconnecting himself from the perpetrator, thus the person who symbolizes a father figure to Quinn. Hence, speaking out means taking risks and

facing his fears. However, Quinn realizes that he has to take responsibility in order not to increase the violence inflicted upon black people by white society:

I'm white too – and that's *exactly why* I was marching. I had to. [...] Nothing was going to change unless we did something about it. *We!* White people! We had to stand up and say something about it too, because otherwise it was just like what one of those posters in the crowd outside school said: Our silence is another kind of violence. (292)

Thus, silence is yet another part of racism and violence, which makes white people equally concerned in racial issues. With the development of Quinn's character from somebody displaying white ignorance to realizing his white responsibility, the novel demonstrates that racism is deeply entrenched also in individuals who consider themselves antiracist but can be overcome when critically reflecting on existing structures.

While Rashad first refuses to hear stories about his incident on the news and look into his face, his stance toward action and thus visibility is facilitated by his artwork. In hospital, he feels compelled to draw and re-create his experience of police brutality, thereby creating his own narrative of the incident. He usually draws faceless figures, which look like "ghosts. Or invisible people" (147). However, when he paints his traumatic event he ultimately decides to give the person a face. As he explains, "all of us looking at the scene see the person who has the hand put through his chest. The dude with his heart torn out. It's impossible to ignore him. He has a face. He deserves a face" (273). Thus, by giving his figure a face he releases him of his invisibility and grants him humanity. He asserts the victim's and thus his own right to be seen and heard.

As Rashad realizes that he cannot remain invisible himself, he agrees to take part in the protest. His decision to publicly demonstrate his pain is motivated by his realization of his personal story of police brutality being indicative of further racial injustices that have to be addressed. By removing his bandages, he directly confronts people with the violence that was inflicted upon him:

I wanted people to see me. See what happened. I wanted people to know that no matter the outcome, no matter if this day ended up as just another protest and Officer Galluzzo got off scot-free, that I would never be the same person. I looked different and I would be different, forever. (303)

Thus, Rashad uses the power he has as a survivor of police brutality and makes himself visible. His character is especially powerful as he stands for survival, for healing after the violence against black people and demonstrates that the pain inflicted upon him only makes him stronger and inspires him to take action.

The novel shows protests as a powerful method for African Americans to gain visibility and speak for their rights. In the black community's struggle for racial justice, protests represent "a piece of the puzzle" (199), which "sends the message to the folks in power that something needs to change." Spoony's goal behind protesting is reminiscent of BLM, which wants to counteract stereotyped images about blacks and assert their humanity: "[A]ll we want is to feel like we can be who we are without being accused of being something else." Much like in *THUG*, the scenes of the protest gradually leave the fictional space and commingle fiction with reality. Jill evokes the campaign #SayHerName, which draws attention to women as well. Moreover, as the protesters stage die-ins, they read out all the names of people of color who were killed at the hands of police officers. Employing the names of real victims of police violence, the novel demonstrates the relevance of its topic and powerfully asserts the visibility of unarmed black people killed by law enforcement officers: "Absent again today! Oscar Grant! Absent again today! Rekia Boyd! Absent again today! Ramarley Graham! [...]" (308). Thus, it is shown that invoking their names is essential for people's acknowledgement of the imminent reality of police brutality today. In the novel's final chapter, written as a poem, Rashad affirms his visibility in society and uses his voice to speak for the victims of police violence, demonstrating African Americans' ongoing fight for racial equality:

For all the people who came before  
us, fighting this fight, I was here,  
screaming at the top of my lungs.  
Rashad Butler.  
Present. (310)

## 5. Conclusion

This fantasy about the disposability of black life is a constant in American history. It takes a while to understand that this disposability continues. It takes whites to understand it; it takes non-black people of color a while to understand it; and it takes some blacks, whether they've always lived in the United States or are latecomers like myself, weaned elsewhere on other struggles, a while to understand it. American racism has many moving parts, and has had enough centuries in which to evolve an impressive camouflage. [...] Like misogyny, it is atmospheric. You don't see it at first. But understanding comes. (Cole 15)

In times where the belief in a colorblind society is widespread in the United States, racism has not vanished but become subtle, making it ever more difficult to realize its presence for people who are not its targets. However, as the countless killings of unarmed African Americans demonstrate, racism is just as real as it was a century ago. Racism today is chimeric; it is about color, and yet manages to blend into the background, to make itself 'colorless'. Hence, it is not necessarily an individual act but a process that irrupts into our lives only intermittently. It takes movements calling for "Black Lives Matter" to show the evidence to the contrary of the phrase. Literature, in this context, serves as a powerful medium through which to map a blueprint of those many moving parts, invisible and scarcely discernible, that structure our reality, and by extension confront people with the daily realities.

Contemporary novelists' endeavor to feature experiences of African Americans, often related to black adolescents' imminent dangers like police brutality, in YA literature helps make racism visible to society. Although not explicitly mentioned, *THUG*, *DM*, and *AAB* are certainly influenced by BLM. While all three books bring up various issues related to racial discrimination, they center around a specific incident of police violence, which defines the protagonists' quest for equality. Likewise, BLM initially emerged as a reaction to unchecked police brutality but clearly also speaks about broader issues that have engendered and continue to sustain systemic racism. As it would go beyond the scope of this thesis to deal with all racial issues mentioned in the novels, despite the numerous shared thematic overlaps I chose to examine different aspects in each book, focusing on those that are most striking in each narrative, yet still drawing a parallel to the two respective other literary works.

All novels foreground interactions between white and black characters, who gradually come to realize the prevalence of racism in the United States, thus the ongoing reality about the disposability of African Americans. Blinded by their white imaginary, the white characters initially fail to see racial injustices and proclaim America's colorblindness or veil themselves

in white silence. *THUG* and *AAB* show Chris' and Quinn's endeavors to critically examine their white worldview, which even galvanizes the latter to speak out for his black peers. In *DM*, Jared is more reluctant to acknowledge prevailing racial inequality; however, the shocking event of Manny's death ultimately makes him realize the myth of America's colorblindness. The black characters, on the other hand, grapple with the victims' invisibility and hypervisibility, engendered by hegemonic white assumptions. Negative images about black people make them more vulnerable to violence as it signifies their dehumanization, thus the devalorization of their lives. Both the victims of police brutality and BLM activists have often been referred to as thugs (Johnson and Jordan). The novels show racism as atmospheric – not directly visible, yet always there – and draw attention to the humanity of black lives, granting the victims a narrative.

As the protagonists try to expose racism's camouflage, they provide counternarratives to the stories spread by the media. While those are first expressed rather privately, as through Rashad's art and Justyce's letters to Martin Luther King, Jr., or anonymous, as through Starr's social media posts, the protagonists ultimately speak for black rights outright in form of protests or debate tournaments. The characters' counternarratives challenge society's way of seeing blackness and prompt people to question their worldview, which is often the "racial production of the visible" (Butler, *Reading* 16). Protests are ultimately depicted as powerful platforms for oppressed groups to express their dissatisfaction with society and force people to really see inequality. Thereby, the novels allude to BLM, which also started as a social media hashtag and only later organized multiple protests. In that sense, the novels represent themselves a counternarrative to the ongoing police violence mainly targeted at black individuals. The books' proximity to reality becomes evident in their depiction of fictional scenarios of events that have already happened in real life and their allusions to backlashes of BLM. Both *THUG* and *AAB* directly show the link of their fictional stories to reality as the names of unjustly killed black people are mentioned at the end of the novel. By literally writing African American literature into the reality of ongoing struggles against racism, the novels demonstrate the capacity for literature to merge the realms of reality and fiction into a hybrid narrative. Inscribing those names in the pages of the book, the authors ensure that black people who died at the hands of police brutality are not forgotten and manifest their humanity. In that sense, the novels inspire young readers not to cease to dare to speak out and not to give up on their quest for equality.

As a future English teacher, I believe it fundamental to confront my students with current controversial issues like police brutality and racism, to provoke critical engagement with discussions about racial issues in Austria as well. As the rise in YA fiction revolving around police violence indicates, racial injustices are a long-lasting problem in the United



States. However, racism as well as police brutality are clearly issues that concern Austria as well, increasingly so in times where immigrants are associated with words like “crisis.” YA novels like the ones analyzed in this thesis lend themselves the appreciation of different perspectives on contentious issues such as racism and invite students to critically reconsider their worldview, which is potentially influenced by white hegemonic beliefs as well. Thus, the three selected novels of this thesis represent valuable examples of literary works that can be used to discuss issues related to the ongoing BLM debate.

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## 7. Appendix

### 7.1. English Abstract

In times where the African American community is repeatedly reminded of the precarity of black lives, due to widespread and targeted police violence, voices speaking out against racial injustices have grown in urgency and vehemence. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, African American young adult novelists have increasingly felt compelled to address the topic of police brutality and offer a counternarrative to the stories about black victims disseminated in the media. This thesis aims to illustrate how prevalent debates of Black Lives Matter are reflected in contemporary young adult fiction. To this end, the first part traces a brief history of black America as well as elucidating substantial issues that have led to the precarious position of African Americans today and to the emergence of the current Black Lives Matter movement. In a second part, the term young adult literature is discussed, drawing special attention to African American young adult literature. Referring to theoretical concepts such as Judith Butler's notion of "precarious life," W. E. B. Du Bois' "double consciousness," and Frantz Fanon's description of the black experience in a white world, three selected novels are analyzed with regards to ongoing debates about racial inequality: *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, and *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendon Kiely. As close literary analysis reveals, the novels feature striking similarities to real-world incidents of police brutality, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to the manifold ways society disregards black life and continues to subject African Americans to racial injustice.

## 7.2. Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die weltweit stetig zunehmende Polizeigewalt, die medial vor allem durch die zahlreichen Tötungen von Afroamerikaner\*innen in den Vereinigten Staaten stark thematisiert wurde, führte in den letzten Jahren zu einem immer lauterem Ruf nach Gleichberechtigung. Inspiriert durch den Hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, der sich schnell von seinem digitalen Ursprung zu einer realen Bewegung weiterentwickelte, spiegelt sich diese Ausprägung des strukturellen Rassismus nun vermehrt in afroamerikanischer Jugendliteratur wieder. Die fiktionalen Auseinandersetzungen mit der Thematik sind nicht nur eine Reaktion auf die vorherrschende Polizeigewalt, sondern machen vor allem auch die Geschichten der zahlreichen Opfer sichtbar, die ansonsten durch die fehlende Berichterstattung der Medien unsichtbar bleiben würden.

Diese Diplomarbeit illustriert, wie diese zentralen Fragestellungen und Debatten im Kontext von Black Lives Matter in der zeitgenössischen afroamerikanischen Jugendliteratur Ausdruck finden. Dementsprechend bietet der erste Teil der Arbeit einen Überblick über die afroamerikanische Geschichte, thematisiert zentrale Problematiken der schwarzen Bevölkerung und kontextualisiert die Black Lives Matter Bewegung innerhalb dieses historischen Kontinuums. Anschließend wird der Begriff der Jugendliteratur genauer definiert und dabei besonders die afroamerikanische Jugendliteratur in den Mittelpunkt gerückt. Ausgehend von theoretischen Konzepten wie Judith Butlers Beschreibung von „gefährdeten Leben“, W. E. B. Du Bois' „double consciousness“ und Frantz Fanons Auseinandersetzung mit der Erfahrungswelt von Schwarzen in einer von Weißen dominierten Gesellschaft werden im analytischen Teil der Diplomarbeit drei ausgewählte Romane in Hinblick auf zentrale Debatten zu Diskriminierung und Unterdrückung der schwarzen Bevölkerungsschicht gelesen. Die literarische Analyse von *The Hate U Give* von Angie Thomas, *Dear Martin* von Nic Stone, und *All American Boys* von Jason Reynolds und Brendon Kiely zeigt dabei, dass diese Romane nicht nur als eine fiktionale Auseinandersetzung mit den real erlebbaren Erfahrungen von Polizeigewalt gelesen werden können, sondern auch wie im 21. Jahrhundert systematischer Rassismus und fehlende Gleichberechtigung die Lebensrealität Afroamerikaner\*innen nachhaltig prägen.

### **Declaration of Authenticity**

I confirm to have conceived and written this Diploma thesis in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references, either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors are truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

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