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**A Comparative Analysis of the New African-American Narratives and
Critical Voices of Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Al Sharpton, and Patrisse
Cullors**

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

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Abstract

The struggle against racism is as old as the United States itself. Although the Civil Rights movement accomplished a significant transformation of the social and political system, it left many things unresolved. For this reason, the main argument of this thesis is that the movement did not really end in the 1960s but still continues to this day. The method used is that of comparison, where I compare the present “new” movement, which spans from the 1970s, with the original one. In this sense, the thesis also focuses on three major activists from the original movement, Martin Luther King Jr, James Baldwin and Malcolm X, to further analyze the attitudes in the original movement and compare them with the current ones later. However, the main focus of the thesis is on four personas who made a significant contribution to the “new” Civil Rights Movement in the era starting from the 1970s and who can be considered as ones of many rightful representatives of it.

Firstly, Toni Morrison and Angela Davis are two prominent writers who adapted writing as an instrument for their activism. In the late 20th century, the general readership rapidly changed. Both writers were able to take this opportunity immediately as they focused their writing on portraying the harsh realities of slavery, racism, and its impacts on black communities. Even though they both focus on prevalently women’s perspectives, their approaches differ significantly. While Davis develops her arguments through non-fiction writing, Morrison uses fiction and non-fiction to present the issues. Another major difference that the thesis considers is the overall approach and ideologies used by the women because Davis offers the problems of the society through the Marxist perspective. By this, the thesis shows how their activism spreads through all types of writing and highlights the differences between the said approaches.

The second comparison is that of two activists, Al Sharpton and Patrisse Cullors. In the thesis, Cullors is considered one of the most recent representatives of the “new” movement. She is mainly recognized as one of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter movement. For this reason, she is an excellent example of a major change considering the nature of movements in general. Rev. Al Sharpton, a civil rights activist and politician, was first chosen by Jesse Jackson in 1969 to work on Operation Breadbasket and has participated in many protests ever since. He is also famous for leading several marches and demonstrations and writing numerous works where he addresses activism and his fight against racism. He is an activist of the “old school” who experienced the Civil Rights era and took his experiences from there.

The aim is to prove that even after so many years, the systemic racism that African Americans face is still a big issue in a country where “all men are created equal”¹ and that because of that, the Civil Rights Movement did not really end, it just expanded to adapt to the new era.

Key words: activism, Al Sharpton, Angela Davis, Black Lives Matter, civil rights, Civil Rights Movement, James Baldwin, literature as activism, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., New Civil Rights Movement, Patrisse Cullors, present-day activism, racism, Toni Morrison

¹ Thomas Jefferson, et al, “Copy of Declaration of Independence,” *Library of Congress*, accessed July 4, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib000159/>.

Abstrakt

Boj proti rasismu je starý jako Spojené státy samy. Přestože hnutí za občanská práva dosáhlo velké změny společenského a politického systému, mnoho problémů zůstalo nevyřešeno. Z tohoto důvodu je hlavním argumentem této práce, že hnutí neskončilo v 60. letech, ale ve skutečnosti trvá dodnes. Použitá metoda je srovnávání současného „nového“ hnutí, které existuje od 70. let 20. století, s tím původním. V tomto smyslu se práce zaměřuje také na tři významné aktivisty původního hnutí: Martina Luthera Kinga Jr., Jamese Baldwina a Malcolma X, díky čemuž dále analyzuji postoje v původním hnutí a porovnávám je s těmi v hnutí současném. V centru pozornosti této práce však stojí čtyři osobnosti, které významně přispěly k „novému“ hnutí za občanská práva v éře od 70. let 20. století a které lze řadit mezi jeho nejvýznamnější představitele.

Za prvé se práce zaměří na Toni Morrison a Angelu Davis, dvě velké spisovatelky, které užívají psaní jako nástroj pro svůj aktivismus. Na konci 20. století prošla obecná čtenářská obec rychlou změnou. Obě autorky této příležitosti okamžitě využily, když se ve svém psaní věnovaly zobrazení drsné reality otroctví, rasismu a jeho dopadu na afroamerické komunity. I když se obě volí převážně ženské perspektivy, jejich přístupy se značně liší. Zatímco Davisová rozvíjí své argumenty prostřednictvím psaní literatury faktu, Morrison používá k prezentaci problémů jak beletrii, tak literaturu faktu. Dalším velkým rozdílem, který práce bere v úvahu, je celkový přístup a ideologie používané ženami, protože Davisová pohlíží problémy společnosti z marxistické perspektivy. Tím práce ukazuje, jak se jejich aktivismus šíří všemi druhy textů, a zároveň poukazuje na odlišnosti uvedených přístupů. Dále pak práce srovnává dvou aktivistů, Al Sharptona a Patrisse Cullorsové. V práci je Cullorsová považována za jednu z nejnovějších představitelk „nového“ hnutí. Tato žena je uznávána jako jedna ze spoluzakladatelek hnutí Black Lives Matter a z tohoto důvodu je vynikajícím příkladem velké změny. Rev. Al Sharpton, aktivista za občanská práva a politik, byl poprvé vybrán samotným Jesse Jacksonem v roce 1969 k práci na operaci Breadbasket a od té doby se zúčastnil mnoha protestů. Proslavil se také vedením několika pochodů, demonstrací a psaním knih, kde se věnuje aktivismu a svému boji proti rasismu. Je aktivistou „staré školy“, který zažil éru původního hnutí boje za občanská práva a tam získal své zkušenosti.

Cílem je dokázat, že i po tolika letech je systémový rasismus, kterému afroameričané čelí, stále velkým problémem v zemi, kde jsou „všichni muži stvořeni sobě rovni“², a že kvůli tomu hnutí za občanská práva ve skutečnosti neskončilo, jen se rozšířilo, aby se přizpůsobilo nové době.

Klíčová slova: aktivismus, Al Sharpton, Angela Davis, Black Lives Matter, Hnutí za občanská práva, James Baldwin, literatura jako aktivismus, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Nové hnutí za občanská práva, občanská práva, Patrisse Cullors, rasismus, současný aktivismus, Toni Morrison

² Thomas Jefferson, et al, “Copy of Declaration of Independence,” *Library of Congress*, accessed July 4, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib000159/>.

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1 Introduction: Activism and the Image of Inferiority

We live in the era of democracy. By giving power to the people themselves, humanity established one of the most significant forms of government so far, where people can individually participate in the running of a state by choosing their representatives. However, this utopic image is not so great when we consider its disadvantages. It is no news that democracy, in general, is a fragile form of government establishment and can easily be misused for the profit of an individual or a particular group of people. Because of this, it is essential to protect it. In the history of humanity, it has mostly been done by the people, activists, who were notoriously calling attention to its problems and defending it. Although the U.S. has served as an inspirational image of democracy, it has its issues too. In American history, those issues have been emphasized mainly by those “pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”³

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, activism is defined as “the policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; spec. the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.”⁴ The need for a change in connection to the African Americans living in the U.S. spread from the ongoing blindness of the democratic state towards the rights of the citizens of the said minority. Even though one of its establishing documents, *The Declaration of Independence*, states that in the U.S., “all men are created equal,”⁵ it is only partly true. The situation could be best described when looking at George Orwell’s book *Animal Farm* where the issue of inequality of its characters is presented as follows “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”⁶

When debating the history of this issue, it is no surprising that African Americans had been perceived as “something less.” This perception is the result of how the state has been dealing with this part of the population. When in the August of 1619, Africans, for the first time, set their feet as “indentured servants”⁷ on the American land, being immediately traded

³ Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), 53.

⁴ "Activism, n.". OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1957?rskey=9YqNil&result=1> (accessed March 29, 2022).

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, et al, “Copy of Declaration of Independence,” *Library of Congress*, accessed July 4, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib000159/>.

⁶ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946), 112.

⁷ Lynda T. Wynn, *Freedom Facts and Firsts: 400 Years of the African American Civil Rights Experience* (Canton: Visible Ink Press, 2009), 23.

with supplies, they were regarded as nothing more than a possession.⁸ For this reason, the year 1619 marks the beginning of this ongoing struggle.

It can be argued that another important marking point is the court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* trial. Even after the *Missouri Compromise* of 1820, the Dred Scott decision resulted in the refusal of providing citizenship to the ancestors of formerly enslaved people.⁹ By being refused equal status again, the position of African Americans in U.S. history was that of inferiors.

Black codes and Jim Crow laws were among the later ones of the many nails in the coffin for this trouble. Although the 13th amendment had been successfully added to the constitution, the situation for African Americans in the U.S. was no better. As stated in the amendment, “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”¹⁰ The amendment as a whole was the famous marking point in the process of the abolition of slavery; however, it was the second part that caused much struggle. Formerly enslaved people, now free, presented a significant threat to the business of their former owners. One way of making the African Americans into a cheap labor force again was to convict them of a crime. According to Michelle Alexander, in that time, “laws defining activities such as ‘mischief’ and ‘insulting gestures’ as crimes were enforced vigorously against blacks. The aggressive enforcement of these criminal offenses opened up an enormous market for convict leasing, in which prisoners were contracted out as laborers to the highest private bidder.”¹¹ Douglas Blackmon, as cited by Alexander, “in *Slavery by Another Name*, describes how tens of thousands of African Americans were arbitrarily arrested [...] many of them hit with court costs and fines, which had to be worked off in order to secure their release.”¹² This not only brought back the servitude but also damaged the overall image of African Americans and added to the famous racist stereotype of an aggressive criminal used in that era. The problem with the amendment remains to some degree to this day. It has left its

⁸ Beth Austin, “First African Landing,” *Hampton History Museum*, last modified December 31, 2019, accessed March 31, 2022, www.HamptonHistoryMuseum.org/1619.

⁹ Melvin I. Urofsky, “Dred Scott Decision,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Dred-Scott-decision>.

¹⁰ U.S. Const. amend. XIII, § 1. Accessed July 20, 2022. <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-13/>.

¹¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, The New Press, 2012), 31.

¹² Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 31.

marks on the issue of incarceration of African Americans and led to the ongoing movement for prison abolition.

The overall situation and social standing of African Americans during and even after the abolition of slavery could be best described in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois:

As slavery grew to a system and the Cotton Kingdom began to expand into imperial white domination, a free Negro was a contradiction, a threat, and a menace. As a thief and a vagabond, he threatened society; but as an educated property holder, a successful mechanic or even a professional man, he more than threatened slavery. He contradicted and undermined it. He must not be. He must be suppressed, enslaved, colonized. And nothing so bad could be said about him that did not easily appear as true to slaveholders.¹³

With Black Codes and Jim Crow laws in the game now, the era of segregation and, therefore, further discrimination has officially started. However, it is important to note that a certain degree of segregation was already present in many ways. For example, according to Moon, there were slave laws already in 1705 that encouraged segregation. Their main goal was to “confirm the perpetual and inherited bondage of people of African descent; establish an entirely separate penal code and judicial system for enslaved people; and create mandatory service in slave patrols by non-slaveholders to force them to protect the property rights of those who owned blacks.”¹⁴ It was the last part that encouraged the division between the white laborers and those of African American descent. This shows that it had long been the state’s intention to differ in the approach to both races, and in the end, the African Americans were those ones to have a subordinate role in this division again.

In 1896, when the court decision of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized segregation, history was only repeating itself. With the famous motto “separate but equal,” the inequality of the consulted race was again emphasized. Segregation was legally abolished during the Civil Rights Movement by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

This thesis will touch upon how this image of inferiors remains to some degree to this day. How this image, thanks to the inability of the state to protect its democratic values, became the central issue from which racism often spreads and which African Americans have been dealing with. It will primarily focus on the activists who remained the main and the most important voices in the fight for change, in the original movement and the “new” one. It will also examine how their activism and their approaches to equality are reflected in the social

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 7.

¹⁴ Wynn, *Freedom*, 24.

movements. Considering the overall history of this issue, which was slightly discussed already, the thesis's primary focus will be on the comparison of the two stages of the movement that have fought against the image of the inferiority of African American citizens. The first stage being the original Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the second stage the "new" movement, which started at the end of the 1960s after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. The leading voices compared will be those of the most famous activists, mainly the approaches of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin, with the new voices of the movement, meaning Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Al Sharpton and Patrisse Cullors, which will also be compared among each other. The thesis will show how the movement expanded in the 1970s and does so to this day. With activists being able to reach a wider audience not only through various media but primarily because of the internet and social networks, the movement became more approachable. The best example of this is the case of Patrisse Cullors which will be closely examined in her approach, and overall notion of the Black Lives Matter movement. On the other hand, Al Sharpton will be examined as the original street activist and a politician to show that the movement in the streets did not die completely.

Lastly, as the readership started to grow rapidly from the 1970s,¹⁵ it became only another opportunity to reach the audience and not only ask them to join the cause but also to explain to them the complexity of the problem that racism has been in the U.S. This has been done by Angela Davis in her nonfiction works along with Toni Morrison, who is, on the other hand, primarily famous for her fiction. Their contributions resulted in a number of achievements, and what is more, they have been able to sustain the function and image of democracy as we know it.

¹⁵ Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison on Capturing a Mother's 'Compulsion' to Nurture in *Beloved*," interview by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, *PBS NewsHour*, 1987, audio, 9:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLQ6ipVRfrE>.

2 The Original Movement: Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s to 1968

Alain Touraine argues that “there is an almost general agreement that social movements should be conceived as a special type of social conflict. [...] A conflict presupposes a clear definition of opponents or competing actors and of the resources they are fighting for or negotiating to take control of.”¹ When considering this definition, to apply it to the Civil Rights Movement does not cause much trouble. The social conflict, meaning the racism and inferiority forced on African Americans, as discussed in the previous chapter, has been a problem of the U.S. which has its roots in the country’s early history. It was only a question of time when some type of more prominent force would finally unite the African Americans to reach the common goal and fight against the inequality imposed on them. However, the “fight” was not that much united in a proper sense. Instead, it was full of people with different approaches, from the more positive and non-violent ones of Martin Luther King Jr and James Baldwin to the more radical ones of Malcolm X and Black Muslims. In the end, however, what was the same was the fight for a common goal.

According to Smith and Wynn, “the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was the most significant realignment of American democracy since the American Civil War of the 1860s.”² This is thanks to all of the leading voices who helped accomplish this change. The competing actors in the movement were African Americans in general; however, their leading voices were the activists; most notable known in this period were Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. and many more. Their main goal was to be the image and the representation of the revolution. They were all famous spokespersons, each of which had a different way of fighting for and negotiating their resources.

The beginning of the movement marked the famous occasion when Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat as a protest against segregation. This action led to her arrest; however, this symbolic act resulted in the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott. Previously, there were actually two more occasions when a similar action took place. Two more women refused to give up their seats to white Americans in the same year. They were 15-year-old Claudette Colvin and 18-year-old Mary Louise. Both were, in the end, arrested; however, neither of

¹Alain Touraine, “An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements,” *Social Research* 52, no. 4 (1985): 750 – 51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970397>.

² Wynn, *Freedom*, 1.

these two operations sparked group action like that of Rosa Parks. It may be because her plan was more organized. Following Parks' arrest Jo Ann Robinson, president of the Women's American Council, mobilized the volunteers that managed to distribute flyers requesting African Americans to help the case and stay off the buses in Montgomery for one day. This was a crucial part of the action as the African Americans made 75% of that day's passengers.³ The organization was not the only reason; according to Hess, "the soft-spoken, respectable Parks served as the perfect symbol to mobilize African Americans for the bus boycott."⁴

And thus, the movement started with a woman taking action. However, in a movement, actions are just one part of the tool; the other important tools are words. When it comes to this movement, probably the most famous spokesperson, who comes to one's mind, is Martin Luther King Jr. It was him who, following the one-day boycott, delivered a speech that influenced African Americans and changed a one-day boycott to one that lasted more than a year.

³ Emily Hess, "Montgomery Bus Boycott" in *Race and Racism in the United States: An Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*, ed. Charles A. Gallagher, Cameron D. Lippard (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 807.

⁴ Hess, "Montgomery Bus Boycott," 807.

2.1 The Case of Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr was just a new, not that much known, preacher at that time when the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was established to help with the organization of the demonstration. King was selected as the president of the said organization with the first role to give a speech and convince the people to vote for the boycott to continue. It is not surprising that he was successful with his rhetorical abilities when he gave the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott speech. In this sense, he started his leading role in the Civil Rights Movement. In his first official speech and later throughout his whole career as a spokesperson, he was the advocate of non-violent activism.

His non-violent approach was ever-present. It can be found even in his first speech when he states, “we are here, we are here this evening because we are tired now. And I want to say that we are not here advocating violence. We have never done that. [...] The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. That’s all.”¹ The main goal of this weapon was, in that case, to attack the most beloved thing in capitalism, money. The daily income that the bus company would lose was close to 400 dollars because of the ongoing resistance of the African Americans to use the buses. Instead, they established a carpool system, walked where they needed to and raised various funds to support the cause.² This all had an effect that, in the end, convinced the government to pronounce segregation unconstitutional. This marked a famous and successful beginning for Martin Luther King Jr. as an advocate for the rights of African Americans. More importantly, from the very beginning, his approach emphasized how wrong and inhuman the portrayals of aggressive African Americans in popular stereotypes were.

Although he is mainly known for his activism, he was also well-educated in philosophy and theology, which eventually helped him make the movement successful. There are many scholars and notions that could serve as his direct influence and inspiration. For example, Rathbun argues that “King’s convictions are nurtured by four major intellectual movements: [...] Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch, [...] Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy as it has been domesticated by Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich; the Personalism [...] and the non-violent

¹ Martin Luther King Jr, “The Montgomery Bus Boycott,” *BlackPast.org*, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1955-martin-luther-king-jr-montgomery-bus-boycott/>.

² Hess, “Montgomery Bus Boycott,” 808-809.

philosophy of love fashioned by Gandhi.”³ However, other scholars, such as Gooding-Williams, also claim that he built the movement on the previous debate of Du Bois.⁴

In his famous book *Stride toward Freedom*, King focuses on the oppressed and the usual ways they deal with the oppression. As cited by Gooding-Williams, “according to King, the oppressed deal with their oppression in three characteristic ways: through “acquiescence: the oppressed resign themselves to their doom”; through violence, which “thrives on hatred”; and through non-violent resistance.”⁵ It is the last part that, although not having much emphasis, is crucial for him in the fight against the racism imposed on African Americans.

In this book, King later uses the same philosophy as Du Bois and applies it to explain the movement’s non-violent tactics. Even here, he emphasizes the importance of a non-violent approach by: “echoing Du Bois, King disavows the political strategies of acquiescent submission and hatred-inspired violence and endorses a third, middle path that is militant, self-respecting, and self-assertive, but that avoids the non-resistance of the acquiescent and the violent resistance of the hater.”⁶

Another critical influence and persona who inspired King in terms of non-violent attitude was, already mentioned, M. Gandhi. Even to this day, the persona of Gandhi is probably a materialization of non-violence. Although he often changed his mind regarding some issues and contradicted himself, throughout his life, he was an advocate of non-violence and an inspiration to many.⁷ Whereas comparing the two may not be easy due to the overall circumstances of both movements and the fact that King died much younger than Gandhi, the inspiration is evident.

According to Mantena,

Though his intellectual milieu had been ripe with admiration for Gandhi, it was his unexpected emergence as a leader of the Montgomery bus boycott that first turned King’s eye to non-violent politics. By the time of his

³ John W. Rathbun, “Martin Luther King: The Theology of Social Action,” *American Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1968): 38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2710989>.

⁴ Robert Gooding-Williams, “The Du Bois Washington Debate and the Idea of Dignity,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Tommie Shelby (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 21, https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=e000xww&AN=1680154&lang=cs&site=e000xww&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_ix.

⁵ Gooding-Williams, “The Du Bois Debate,” 22.

⁶ Gooding-Williams, “The Du Bois Debate,” 22.

⁷ Ania Loomba, “THE VIOLENCE OF GANDHI’S NON-VIOLENCE,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2014): 20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44733571>.

assassination, however, King had become non-violence's most powerful advocate. His identification with and commitment to non-violence had so deepened that King, like Gandhi before him, saw his life as a referendum, a final test - a showdown - on the very possibility of non-violent politics.⁸

By combining all of these philosophies and using almost every aspect of them in his speeches, he makes them even more convincing. For example, in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, he explains that “in any non-violent campaign, there are four basic steps: a collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action.”⁹ Although one can imagine rather a violent act by the name “direct action” where negotiation would still do, he describes that this is sadly impossible as African Americans have for a long time “bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.”¹⁰ Here, he again links his ideas with those of Gandhi's non-violent activism when he states that “non-violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”¹¹

His relationship to theology is also emphasized on numerous occasions. For example, he uses a reference to the Bible in *A Letter from Birmingham Jail* as follows,

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.¹²

Another instance of this can be found in his famous speech “I Have a Dream,” where he quotes Isaiah; “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will

⁸ Karuna Mantena, “Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Tommie Shelby (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018) 79. https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=e000xww&AN=1680154&lang=cs&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_ix.

⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” *African Studies Center*, accessed April 20, 2022, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

¹⁰ King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

¹¹ King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

¹² King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.’¹³ By constant references to religion, he not only does show how his idea of activism is interlocked with his faith but also uses it to develop further one of the roles of religion, which is to unite people with a common purpose.

His overall goal was to fight for the democratic approach and for African Americans to be part of the democratic system. This is best described at the end of “I Have a Dream” speech, where he states, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”¹⁴

¹³ Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” *American Rhetoric*, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>.

¹⁴ King Jr., “I Have a Dream.”

2.2 The Case of James Baldwin

In the introduction of the book *Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, he is described by Michelle Elam as “one of the most important writers and provocative cultural critics of the twentieth century.”¹ This description does celebrate the genius that he, in fact, became over time. However, when in 1968, James Baldwin himself defined his position in the Civil Rights movement, claiming, “I am not a public speaker, I am an artist.”² This statement reflects what a limiting image of the overall contribution as a person he held in that era. His reach may not have been as a public speaker but simply as a writer, which is by no means limiting because books are just another way of addressing the audience, in this case, of readers.

As opposed to King, there are many claims by a number of critics which described Baldwin as “not, by any stretch of the imagination, as Negro leader” or that he was “nicknamed ‘Martin Luther Queen’ with the implication that a ‘queen’ could not participate in the violent and manly battle for civil rights.”³ However, the popularity of his literary persona was rising. In this sense, Edwards argues that the success of the work *The Fire Next Time* put him at the forefront, and he eventually became “a spokesman for the race.”⁴ By this, he was finally regarded as one of the proper literary voices. It was with this book that he became associated with the civil rights rhetoric while criticizing the problem of racism in the U.S and how the white majority was to blame for this. His genius can be observed in a number of his works, which include, for example, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows my Name*, *No Name in the Street* and *The Fire Next Time*.

His activism comes from the fact that he was the author of everyone, criticizing racism along with its history and its effects on people. When asked in an interview if he was aware that he was writing for a white audience, he famously responded, “I am writing for people, baby. No, I do not believe in white people. I don’t believe in black people either, for that

¹ Michelle Elam, *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 1.

² Douglas Field, “Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor,” *Callaloo* 27, no. 2 (2004): 461. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3300682>.

³ Erica R. Edwards, “Baldwin and Black Leadership” in *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Michele Elam (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 150.

⁴ Edwards, “Baldwin and Black Leadership,” 150.

matter. But I know the difference between being black and white at this time.”⁵ Although he addresses both audiences, being aware of his readers, he uses these occasions to explain the troubles and hardships of what it means to be African American to the white audience. He was the leading critic of race relations in America, reflecting this issue widely in his fiction and nonfiction. Much of his criticism is applicable even to today’s situations and will be accordingly discussed in the following chapters concerning the “new” movement.

As an overall persona, he had a highly interesting image which he developed throughout his life. Raised by a preacher, being homosexual and a black man in the U.S. definitely made him part of an even smaller minority than he already belonged to, making his situation even harder. Even though he did not use the term homosexual to describe himself because he did not like the label of the name and what it indicated, his sexuality is a more complex subject which is not the theme of this thesis. In Field’s words, Baldwin stated that “his sexuality ‘was his own affair which he ought to have kept hidden from us.’”⁶

Nevertheless, he used this all to his advantage. Even though he stood out as an individual, he used it to explore his double minority status and therefore place ground for other writers in similar situations. He even became one of the important voices on the problem of sexuality and criticized as the main problem its perception by the heterosexual majority. Because of his colorful persona, critics’ perceptions of him varied, as Field states in his book, “Lowenstein argues, Baldwin’s ‘double minority status is so ‘threatening’ that what is finally reviewed in the end is the critics’ own fears and projections.”⁷

When it comes to the question of one’s identity and sexuality, these themes are mostly explored in his works of fiction; his characters and stories touch upon the subjects of “homosexuality” and “bisexuality.”⁸ Even though he never used such terms, it is evident from the usage of language and overall situations in the plot. Even according to Field, Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* can be considered as one of the first books in which homosexual relationship is used and explored.⁹ As complicated as the problem with terminology regarding one’s sexual identity may seem, in one of his books, Baldwin used the following description.

⁵ James Baldwin, “Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris,” interview by Terence Dixon, *FshareTV*, 1970, documentary, 22:50, <https://fsharetv.co/movie/meeting-the-man:-james-baldwin-in-paris-episode-1-tt0412990>.

⁶ Douglas Field, *James Baldwin* (Devon: Northcote House Publishers, 2011), 46.

⁷ Field, *James Baldwin*, 44.

⁸ Here, I use the quotation marks because he did not identify them as such, but these labels make the overall terminology more clear.

⁹ Field, *James Baldwin*, 48.

The narrator claims, “but we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other – male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other.”¹⁰ The passage helps to understand his perception of individuals’ both sexual and racial identity.

Because of all this, he is considered one of the important literary voices and activists in the original Civil Rights era. He was not only a spokesperson for the African Americans but for everybody who felt to be different and a part of the minority. Although his activism can mostly be found in his writings, he was no less activist than any of the personas explored in this thesis. He was a colorful persona. Douglas Field, in his biography of James Baldwin, described him as follows; “He was, as he knew only too well, many things to many people. Or, as he wrote in *No Name in the Street*, ‘what in the world was I by now but an ageing, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak?’”¹¹

¹⁰ Field, *James Baldwin*, 52.

¹¹ Field, *James Baldwin*, 9.

2.3 The Case of Malcolm X

A complete opposite approach to the movement was used by another influential figure, Malcolm X. Unlike Baldwin, Malcolm X was a public speaker and an important orator for the cause of civil rights. This definition may connect him with Martin Luther King Jr.; however, being a powerful orator with extraordinary rhetoric abilities were the only things they had in common.

As is well known, his notion was contrary to that of King in which he did not wholly refuse the violent approach. In the matters of liberation versus integration, he was the advocate for the liberation of African American society. In the words of Handler, Malcolm was “a man unreservedly committed to the cause of liberating the black man in American society rather than integrating the black man into that society.”¹

Another contrast between him and King was the viewpoint of religion. In his earlier years, he was known for being a student of Elijah Muhammad, where he adapted the teachings in connection to Islam as perceived by Muhammad. At that time, Muhammad was a separatist and the leader of the Nation of Islam, Black Muslims. This period in Malcolm’s life is particularly important because of his opinion on white people in general. Sharing the separatist view with his teacher Muhammad, he was convinced about the devilish nature of the white race. He was referring to them as “white devils” because, according to Muhammad’s teachings, it was “the devil white man,’ [that] down through history, out of his devilish nature, had pillaged, murdered, raped, and exploited every race of man not white.”² These teachings influenced his aggressive manner of rhetoric and his earlier attitude toward the relationship between the races.

Unlike that of King, Malcolm’s opinion on Christianity was hostile; he referred to it “as a religion designed for slaves and the Negro clergy as the curse of the black man, exploiting him for their own purposes instead of seeking to liberate him, and acting as handmaidens of the white community in its determination to keep the Negroes in a subservient position.”³ Till the end of his life, he was a great advocate of the teachings of Islam. However, his visit to Mecca made him change his previous separatist attitude toward a positive relationship between the races. As he states, it was precisely the influence of the “orthodox Islam which

¹ Malcom X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (New York: A One World Book, 1965), 6, Adobe Digital Editions.

² Malcom X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 170.

³ Malcom X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 7.

had given [him] the insight and perspective to see that the black men and white men truly could be brothers.”⁴

When it comes to his rhetorical abilities, his attitude is best captured in his speech “The Ballot or the Bullet,” where he emphasizes the importance of voting and, at the same time, encourages the audience to take part in this process. In this speech, he depicts the “white man” as the main villain in the struggle of African Americans; however, he later affirms that “it doesn’t mean that we’re anti-white, but it does mean we’re anti-exploitation, we’re anti-degradation, we’re anti-oppression.”⁵ By doing so, he rejects his previous Muhammad inspired teachings and focuses more on the problem of racism as a problem of failing democracy. As he argues, he is “one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy.”⁶

He encourages people to take part in the democratic system by numerous pointing to the fact that although the democracy has failed them, they still have a right to vote and what is more, he wants the people to do so with pre-thought choice as by the end of his speech he reveals another meaning of the title: “Don’t be throwing out any ballots. A ballot is like a bullet. You don’t throw your ballots until you see a target, and if that target is not within your reach, keep your ballot in your pocket.”⁷

All of this shows that he was among the primary critics of the democratic system and the racism which the failure of the said institution sparked. Although his previous connections with Muhammad may have gained him a negative picture, the fact that his later attitude changed is still important because it left a significant mark on the advancement of the civil rights struggle.

⁴ Malcom X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 364.

⁵ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” *So Just net*, accessed April 29, 2022.

http://www.sojust.net/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html.

⁶ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet.”

⁷ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet.”

3 The End of an Era and the New Movement: From 1970 to Present

The Civil Rights Movement brought a significant change to the U.S. The country, in general, moved even closer to its presumed democratic image by granting more rights to minorities. In particular, the period resulted in some significant accomplishments for the Afro-American society, for example, making segregation illegal in public schools, the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and most importantly, the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The peak of the original Civil Rights era was its end, the period of the 1960s. Even though the “swinging sixties” were the years of great social and cultural changes in the U.S., they were also years of significant loss, with President Kennedy being assassinated in 1963 and two influential civil rights leaders, Malcolm X, in 1965 and King Jr in 1968. For this reason, the end of the Civil Rights Movement is believed to be the year 1968; it ended with the assassination of one of its leading figures, Martin Luther King Jr.

However, to think that the movement died with him gives a limiting perspective to the movement in general. As Audre Lorde, in her essay “Learning from the 60s,” argues, “revolution is not a one-time event.”¹ The year 1968 may mark the inevitable death of one era, but what it also does is that it indicates the birth of another one. The fight for rights was not a one-time event; after 1968, it only moved to different spheres, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

When looking back to the period of the original movement, Lorde acknowledges the outreach the movement had and the inspiration to other movements it sparked but also criticizes its structure. She claims that the presence of its previous leaders and their position may have been actually a mistake. She argues that people should not wait for one leader like King or Malcolm because what will happen if he is killed or disregarded. She states:

And if we wait to put our future into the hands of some new messiah, what will happen when those leaders are shot, or discredited, or tried for murder, or called homosexual, or otherwise disempowered? Do we put our future on hold? What is that internalized and self-destructive barrier that keeps us from moving, that keeps us from coming together?²

¹ Audre Lorde, “Learning from the 60s,” *Black Past*, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s/>.

² Lorde, “Learning from the 60s.”

According to her, each individual must depend on himself or herself and find their place in the change. This commentary and criticism of the movement are essential because it precisely describes the structure of the new movement today. Although there are some activists that are better known than others, there is not a leader that would be the face of it. The people are the leaders and the power together, and each must depend on themselves; in an Emersonian sense, people should become self-reliant.

There should be no leaders like those we knew in the past. In today's world, with the use of social networks, the internet and overall accessibility to literature and press, this has started to be possible. The so-called leaders should be able to reach a wider audience and do not have to be put in a spotlight in the streets; what is more, another way to shine some light on a problem is to present it through literature, either fiction or nonfiction. Because of these reasons, as already stated, this thesis focuses on four personas, each representing one crucial aspect of the New Movement. Angela Davis and Toni Morrison are considered as the representatives of its literary side. At the same time, Patrisse Cullors and Reverent Al Sharpton are regarded as the representatives of its more active side.

3.1 Literature as Activism in the New Movement

There is no doubt that literature, in general, has great importance in our lives and can serve many purposes. That literature can function as a medium that shapes how one perceives their own identity and even shapes the national consciousness of a whole imagined community – the nation, has been described by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*.

Similarly, Betty Friedan used literature to emphasize the problems women had to face – the perception of their role in society during the Second Wave of the feminist movement. In her book *Feminine Mystique*, she analyses the role women had to fill because of the images that society had provided. The image was shaped by the most approachable medium at that time, the magazines. Her work helped to shine more light on an ongoing problem at that time.

As already mentioned, it was Anderson who studied the models of imagining in relation to imagined communities. He emphasizes two main models of imagining the social space and communities. These models are exemplified by the novel and the newspaper. Simply said, the novel's main purpose is for a reader to sympathize with the hero (who has a function as a representative of the community). This way, the reader imagines the social space and the community and is encouraged to act likewise. The primary purpose of the newspaper is the same. It is also a certain way of representing and imagining of communities. However, the reading itself is, to a certain degree, a ritual which (he references Hegel there) at that time substituted morning prayers.¹ In this sense, the magazines shared the same function; by being widely approachable and highly demanded, they thus became an influential medium through which the image of a woman as a housewife was formed. Reading a magazine became a ritual to every housewife who was too tired to focus on a novel.² Friedan states that “in the 1950's they printed virtually no articles except those that serviced women as housewives, or described women as housewives, or permitted a purely feminine identification like the Duchess of Windsor or Princess Margaret.”³ This shows what a strong influence on how we perceive the world around us literature actually has. In this way, Friedan uses literature as a medium to point out to a serious problem and as a resource for her feminist activism.

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) chapter 1-3.

² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) chapter 2.

³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 78.

In a similar sense, Betty Wilson, in her article, quotes Shady Cosgrove, who concerns himself with the question, “how can reading novels affect our capacity for empathy and thus our capacity for social change?”⁴ He offers the following answer: “Reading and writing support our ability to empathize [...] Reading and writing the novel can lay critical groundwork for imagining alternative realities and worlds”⁵ This shows that literature has always been an excellent instrument for emphasizing a problem or describing the issues of a particular group. By reading both fiction and nonfiction, the audience becomes aware of the problems in a given society and can join the fight to become a part of activism.

There have been numerous authors whose work can be described as activist literature. However, when it comes to literary civil rights activism, the most notable writers are Toni Morrison and Angela Davis. Their presence is inseparable from the new era of the Civil Rights Movement, especially when considering their focus. They focus their works not only on racism in general but also on the rights of Afro-American women and the problem of racism in the process of incarceration in the U.S. The role of both authors in the Civil Rights Movement is similar to that of Velma Pollard, who once claimed that: “I do not march, but I write.”⁶

⁴ Betty Wilson, “Literature and Activism, Literature as Activism,” *Caribbean quarterly*, 66, no. 3 (2020): 408, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2020.1802873>.

⁵ Wilson, “Literature and Activism,” 409.

⁶ Wilson, “Literature and Activism,” 405.

3.1.1 The Case of Toni Morrison

In one of her essays, Toni Morrison reminisces upon the words her friend said to her at a time when democratic values in the U.S were again in decline. She states: “This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.”¹ Her practicing her innate need to write when the world around us is coming to pieces and capturing these moments through fiction is probably why her works ended up being the masterpieces they are. That is also why she, in 1993, was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature and, in 1988, the Pulitzer Prize.

Toni Morrison is not only a famous fiction writer, but she is also well known for her nonfiction works, like essays and speeches in which she addresses the problem of racism, primarily focusing on African American persona. Like other authors, she was well aware of the power of literature and the influence it can have on its readers. That is why, in her essay, “The Site of Memory,” she starts with the discussion about the purpose of the slave narratives in the past and what an important role they had. This is mainly when addressing the problem of inherent racism towards formerly enslaved people who were not even considered human beings by the general population and the state.

She argues that

these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: “This is my historical life - my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.” Two: “I write this text to persuade other people - you, the reader, who is probably not black - that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery.” With these two missions in mind, the narratives were clearly pointed.²

She used her works in the same way, not only to persuade people that African Americans are human beings too but also to explain and shine some light on the complex circumstances that they came from and are influenced by on a daily basis.

When looking at the historical development of African American persona, there is no doubt that the treatment during the period of slavery and even after left its marks which can be

¹ Toni Morrison, “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear: In Times of Dread, Artists Must Never Choose to Remain Silent,” *The Nation*, March 23, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/>

² Toni Morrison, *The Site of Memory, from Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 86.

seen even today. That is precisely what Morrison concerns herself with. In her first major work, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, she focuses on the consequences of whitewashing and the influence of the white gaze on African Americans.

Being given the marking of “someone of lesser standing” or that of a complete inferior has been, as already discussed in previous chapters, the problem that African Americans have been trying to resolve during the era of the original Civil Rights Movement. Although the laws were passed and the legal situation developed positively, the damage was already done. The centuries of these racist images and stereotypes left their marks on the whole population. Moreover, this resulted in a damaging perception of African Americans, even by themselves, which means that white skin was perceived as the correct, the pure and the right. In contrast, black skin signified something terrible, dirty, and angry. The contrast of races and their “colors” is what is one of the main themes in *The Bluest Eye*.

Morrison uses this book as a testimony to expose the sad conditions of U.S. society; she focuses on people’s perception of race, which is still a big problem. In the past, it was during the era of the arrival of the first enslaved people when they were mainly perceived by their skin’s dark complexion. They were referred to simply as “blacks,” which may seem usual and logical. However, the connotations of the mentioned color are not usual at all. According to Jordan, some *Oxford English Dictionary’s* definitions of the color at that time, among others, were “deeply stained with dirt, soiled, dirty, foul, [...] having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; [...] sinister, [...] indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment.”³

In her book *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison starts precisely with this “examination” or rather a metaphorical description of the terrible consequences that this perception of race has on the people. The problem begins as early as in the childhood of the characters, affecting the lives of the smallest in the African American community:

A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody’s did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. [...] if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right. It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my

³ Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man’s Burden: Historical Origins of the Racism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 6.

fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding.⁴

The “unyielding earth,” the environment full of negative stereotypes, is where African Americans are still enslaved in and, therefore, where a human being cannot flourish and grow. This situation resembles way too much the issue in the U.S. The girls are left only to argue who is to blame when it is a racist society that is the real problem as it leaves more damaging effects than positive ones because of centuries-old stereotypes. That is where Morrison’s issue with racism starts. She emphasizes this issue and its effects later with the usage of several contrasts.

One of those effects is the contrast of races. This rather negative stereotype is presented in various works of fiction. Christian argues that most black women were presented in an image that “intended to further create a submission, conflict between black man and woman, and importantly a dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront.”⁵ This was used in opposition to the white woman, which “was supposed to be frail alabaster white, incapable of doing the hard work shimmering with the beauty of fragile crystal.”⁶ This contrast is widely present throughout the whole novel.

The image of Dick and Jane is the first example of this. The text functioned as a grade-school reader and was known to every child. In connection to this, Jane Kuenz states that “its widespread use made learning the pleasures of Dick and Janes commodified life dangerously synonymous with learning itself, [...] it stands as the only visible model for happiness and thus implicitly accuses those whose lives do not match up.”⁷

The contrast is later applied directly to the characters’ lives. To be white meant to be pretty, and that is where Pecola’s issue with her appearance and her tragedy begins. For instance, when Pecola, for the first time, joins the MacTeer family, she is met with Shirley Temple cup. Shirley, in this case, functions as a role model to the young girls as they both “gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face”⁸ while they “had a loving

⁴ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 5.

⁵ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 2.

⁶ Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 2.

⁷ Jane Kuenz “The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community and Black Female Subjectivity” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 98.

⁸ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 19.

conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was.”⁹ Shirley Temple, at that time, was a real-life figure and a young star of Hollywood. As cited by CNN, she was so famous that “her popularity spawned a large array of merchandizing items, such as dolls, hats and dresses.”¹⁰ She became an idol to the young girls, her face recognized by everybody and therefore functioning as the representative of the typical American young girl—the image which sadly did not fit the appearance of the African American children.

Another contrasting element is highlighted during the visit of Mrs. Breedlove by her appearance: “Mrs. Breedlove’s skin glowed like taffeta in the reflection of white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware.”¹¹ This contrast is more crucial to Pecola herself. Upon meeting the little white girl, Pecola observed the girl called her mother “Polly” while she, her own daughter, always referred to her as “Mrs. Breedlove.” Hatred aimed towards the black child and love shown to the white one is another instance of a whitewashing problem. It is especially troubling when the case applies to Pecola, her own child. Surányi argues that by this, “Morrison clearly condemns a racist culture for its worship of white standards of beauty and reacts against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in the outside gaze projected onto popular images.”¹²

Another example of this perfect whiteness is portrayed by the dolls. Claudia is the only one aware of this problem which strangely everyone seems to ignore: “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured”¹³ The doll in the story became not only a symbol of a treasure but one needed to be worthy to have it: “This is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it.”¹⁴

These portrayals add to her struggle with her appearance and also to her starting obsession with blue eyes: “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love, Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.”¹⁵ All of this resulted in Pecola’s madness and the loss of her own

⁹ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 19.

¹⁰ Ben Brumfield, “Famed Former Child Actress Shirley Temple Dies,” *CNN*, created February 11, 2014, accessed, July 28, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/11/showbiz/hollywood-shirley-temple-death/>.

¹¹ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 107 – 08.

¹² Ágnes Surányi, “The Bluest Eye and Sula: Black Female Experience from Childhood to Womanhood,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. Justine Tally (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 13.

¹³ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 20.

¹⁴ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 21.

¹⁵ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 50.

identity when by the end of the novel, she is seen talking to a presumably imaginary friend while admiring her “bluest eye” in the mirror.

Considering all this, Surányi claims that “the singular noun may refer to the damaging white gaze; the omitted plural to the object of desire, an epitome of beauty according to mainstream society; or alternatively, to the saddest story of the demise of a child’s identity (the “eye” as “I”), integral to the blues sung by Claudia’s mother.”¹⁶

These images and Pecola’s attitude represent the ever-present struggle of young people of color in today’s world. By Pecola’s example, Morrison emphasizes how these stereotypes and racist attitudes can lead to the destruction of an individual. According to Christian, “Morrison finds the language to describe the psychic trauma experienced by so many black girls growing up in a culture where blue eyes and blonde hair are the culmination of beauty.”¹⁷

By the end of the novel, it is Claudia who comes to terms with the whole situation, as she realizes it was not their fault from the very beginning and that, in fact, it is society who is to blame:

And now when I see her searching the garbage [...] I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it’s much, much, much too late.¹⁸

It can be argued that this desperation and lost hope represent the feelings of the minority, where the people do not feel any opportunity for improvement. The situation has been the same for too long, and the issues have been embedded in people’s psyches so deep that it is way too late for a change.

Another important work of fiction in which she captures the racial problem and, unlike in *The Bluest Eye*, focuses more on the direct consequences of slavery is her book, *Beloved*. Morrison, as already discussed, highlighted the importance of slave narratives in her essay “The Site of Memory.” It can be argued that this book shares a similar function and structure to a slave narrative. Even though the book is often described as fiction, it does indeed have a

¹⁶ Surányi, “The Bluest Eye and Sula,” 11.

¹⁷ Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 25.

¹⁸ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 206.

connection to a real-life slave story. Morrison wrote the book in relation to the case of Margaret Garner, an enslaved person who killed her children because she wanted to spare them the lives full of horror that slavery to her was. In this matter, Morrison explores the psychological effects of slavery and the marks it left on the fictional characters who experienced all the traumas of it. She focuses mainly on African American psyche, the complex identity of the people, the family relationships, and identities developed because of slavery. She does this while accommodating the common themes and techniques of postmodern literature, mainly magical realism.

Simply put, *Beloved* captures the story of a mother, Sethe, who kills her child because she wants to protect her before the enslaved life waiting for her. Later, her daughter, Beloved, comes to haunt the family as a reminder of the act Sethe committed.¹⁹ However, the story as a whole is not so simple, and there is more to it than just the act of killing. Similarly, as in *The Bluest Eye*, one has to look further to find out who is to blame for the monstrosity, the act of killing, which is one of the book's main topics.

The main character, Sethe, lives with a desire to save her children. Experiencing the horrors of slavery herself, the years of oppression left her with so much suffering and pain that she simply could not imagine the same faith for her children. The last thing Sethe could do for her child as a mother was to protect her from the horrors that inevitably awaited them all in the future.

In this sense, Žižek argues,

crucial to the understanding of Sethe's desperate measures are her later apparently paradoxical musings where she declares: 'If I hadn't killed her, she would have died, and that is something I could not bear to happen to her.' Killing her daughter was the only way to preserve her minimal dignity of her life [...] - in a radical situation of forced choice in which, because of the relations of slavery, Sethe's children 'weren't hers at all,' the only way open to her to act effectively as a parent, protect her children and save their dignity, is to kill them.²⁰

Considering all the circumstances, the monstrosity of her act can, in the end, be debatable because, theoretically speaking, she was not the one that committed it. The act was a result of years of oppression and destroyed the image of an individual and a family. This problem is also examined in Davis's work and will be more closely discussed in the next chapter. Morrison uses the case of Garner as an inspiration. She was able to transform the

¹⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2008), 143.

aggressive act of killing. By this, she emphasizes even further the destroying consequences that history had on the lives of African Americans’.

Another critical part of the book is the existence of the ghost itself. Coming from the past, and therefore reminding of it. It can be argued that the ghost character of *Beloved* does not only function as a reminder of the act of killing but also, in this manner, metaphorically represents the era of slavery itself, which consequences have been haunting the lives of African Americans for centuries, similarly as *Beloved* does haunt her family.

Because of these reasons, her novels prove what a genius Morrison is and how she is able to include and play with activism in her fiction. By writing about it, even metaphorically, her readers are able to take at least a closer look at the struggle which has been affecting African Americans for centuries. After reading her works, one can understand at least to some degree how damaging can white gaze be and therefore becomes aware of the problem of whitewashing and the consequent need for a change.

In her Nobel lecture, she famously proclaimed

The bird is in your hands, [meaning] whether it is to stay alive, it is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility. [...] So, I choose to read the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer. She is worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes. Being a writer, she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as an agency – as an act with consequences.²¹

The changing democratic values were not the only cause that made her activism possible; another significant part of it was the rise of readership after the 1970s. According to Morrison herself, “something happened in the meantime, and a huge readership emerged, black and white and female, which made a difference in what was published. [...] People in the book industry were interested in books by black people that said, ‘tell me how angry you are.’”²² This attitude of publishers and the readers enabled her to explore the complex circumstances and the problems of African American community.

As already stated, literature is an excellent instrument for activism. Morrison shows that one does not have to march to change something. It is enough to write, and in this sense, a similar approach was adopted by Angela Davis.

²¹ Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture,” *NobelPrize.org*, accessed 7 July 2022,

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>.

²² Toni Morrison, “Toni Morrison on Capturing a Mother’s ‘Compulsion’ to Nurture in *Beloved*,” interview by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, *PBS NewsHour*, 1987, audio, 9:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLQ6ipVRfrE_.

3.1.2 The Case of Angela Davis

One of the main problems that have been haunting women for centuries are the prejudicial images produced by society, to which women often did not fit at all. These images and the position of women are one focus of Davis' activism. Throughout history, women were not considered an equal part of the population in the democratic state that the U.S. proclaimed itself to be. This inequality of women to men is still present to some degree; however, African American women had to endure circumstances more extreme than men and white women in the past.

Beginning with the era of slavery, Davis, in her book *Women Race and Class*, shines some light on this complex problem. When debating the image of a woman at that time, she states, "Uncle Tom and Sambo have always found faithful companions in Aunt Jemina and the Black Mammy – stereotypes which presume to capture the black woman's role during slavery."¹ She then goes on to describe how the truth was actually the opposite as the women, mainly in the deep south, were field workers. Therefore, the oppression of women was even worse than that of men. She claims that "when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked exclusively into their female roles."²

This "role shifting" continued for a long time and became even more prominent after the abolition of the slave trade when they became an essential asset for their owners. At that time, no more enslaved people would be brought from abroad, and as they were still a highly demanded "product," there was an option for the expansion of the market and the income. In this sense, Davis argues that it was during this time that "slave women were classified as breeders"³ at the expense of the slave owners. What is more, a similar faith followed the youngest. At the exact moment they were born, they became only a product of capitalism and the income for the slave owners, and similar language was also applied to them as well. This issue had severe consequences, as she claims, "one year after the importation of Africans was halted, a South Carolina court ruled that enslaved women had no legal claims on their children. Consequently, according to this ruling, children could be sold away from their

¹ Angela Davis, *Women Race and Class* (New York, Random House, 1981), 5.

² Davis, *Women Race and Class*, 6.

³ Davis, *Women Race and Class*, 7.

mothers at any age because ‘the young of slaves [...] stand on the same footing as other animals.’⁴ This era left great marks in the subconscious of the state and also on the lives of African Americans. The problem of the family image was so severe that it became a topic exemplified both in fiction by Morrison’s *Beloved* and nonfiction by Davis. For enslaved people, the idea of a family in a proper sense became nonexistent, and, in this way, so did the relationships among its members. This way, the activism of both women overlaps because they both emphasize the cruel history with its impacts, each, however, in her own way, becoming inseparable parts of present-day activism.

Davis’ activism does not only emphasize the devastating consequences the racism had on family relations. She highlights another fact, which is that the position of a black female did not improve as opposed to those of a male. Another critical point in the struggle for women’s rights was, surprisingly, the post-Civil Rights Movement era. The period brought some significant improvements for the black community; however, the reality for African American women did not improve in many aspects. As already stated, the “role shifting” had tremendous consequences. In a study published in 1986, Joyce Ladner analyzed the conditions of African American women in the U.S. She came to the horrible conclusion that the state and position of an African American woman did not ameliorate that much from the pre-Civil Rights Movement era; in fact, the conditions for females became worse. She argues that “despite gains achieved by white women over the past two decades, a larger percentage of black women live below the poverty line today than did in 1970.”⁵ That the movement is still somehow forgetting about its female population is shown in another example which is a more recent study published in 2020. According to Stewart Coles, “black women are often overlooked in people’s conversations about racism and sexism even though they face a unique combination of both of these forms of discrimination simultaneously.”⁶ These examples show that the fight is not over, and the problems remain even today as African American women face many injustices, which is why the feminist activism of Davis is still relevant.

When it comes to the “old days” of the Civil Rights Movement, Angela Yvonne Davis is probably one of the most famous activists and, in fact, an inseparable persona to a point when she became one of the images of the movement. Her main concerns are the problems of

⁴ Davis, *Women Race and Class*, 7.

⁵ Joyce A. Ladner, “BLACK WOMEN FACE THE 21ST CENTURY: MAJOR ISSUES AND PROBLEMS,” *The Black Scholar* 17, no. 5 (1986): 12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41068152>.

⁶ Stewart M. Coles, “Black Women often Ignored by Social Justice Movements,” *American Psychological Association*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/07/black-women-social-justice>

race, gender, and class. Today, she is also a big part of the prison abolition movement, speaking loudly about the injustices of the legal system. Being also a university professor and a lifetime educator of the importance of not only human rights but also animal and environmental rights shows that she is not only an activist who is an author but also a highly involved spokesperson. Davis was an activist in a proper sense, even in the past. Her part in the Black Panther Party and joining the American Communist Party made her a highly involved woman. As in the lives of activists generally, things did not always work out in her favor. Especially at that time when she was arrested after an accident which included Jonathan Jackson and other accomplices who took hostages to free the Soledad brothers from prison, which resulted in the deaths of four people. Davis was arrested “because the weapons belonged to [her], they charged her with all the resultant crimes of which the weapons were a part.”⁷ It was after this that the images of a dangerous FBI asset, the most wanted criminal and lastly, as Nixon at that time put it, “dangerous terrorist,”⁸ started to develop. This incident and her former arrest helped her to accomplish the persona we know today; because of the tremendous campaign for her to be freed from jail, she became well known, and because of her arrest, she was able to experience the state of the prison system, and that is why she became so involved in the prison abolition movement. Her activism draws from her own experiences and the injustices she experienced first-hand.

After her release, in the 1970s, she started her active campaign abroad, visiting Cuba, the Soviet Union and Eastern Germany, giving speeches where possible. However, that was also when she acquired an image which was even more damaging. Being associated with people such as Fidel Castro, Jim Jones and the cult of Peoples Temple did not put her in the brightest light as she was already very outspoken about her support of communism. However, it has to be noted that even though she was often judged for supporting this regime, her application of Marxism, as a criticism of capitalism, to the circumstances of African Americans in the U.S. was actually reasonable. In her autobiography, she states that after reading the *Communist Manifesto*, she “began to see the problems of Black people within the context of a large working-class movement.”⁹ This way, she links the issues of African Americans directly to those of the “working classes” as termed in the *Manifesto* and therefore places the minorities as a part of the proletariat. Since it were exactly African Americans, the

⁷ Joe, “The History Behind Angela Davis’ Arrest,” *The Arthur Ashe Legacy*, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://arthurashe.ucla.edu/2016/08/18/the-history-behind-angela-davis-arrest/>.

⁸ Joe, “The History Behind Angela Davis’ Arrest.”

⁹ Angela Y. Davis, *An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 110.

formerly enslaved people and even their ancestors that were responsible for the wealth and prosperity of the U.S. society. The part which captured her attention the most was the vision of the “new society, without exploiters or exploited, a society without classes, [...] where no one would be permitted to own so much that he could use his possessions to exploit other human beings.”¹⁰ A vision that to this day remains way too utopic.

As already stated, she has long been an active fighter for the rights of women, especially focusing on the image and circumstances of African American women in the U.S. She also directs some of her activism on the problem of incarceration, which has its roots, as most problems which African Americans must face, in the era of Slavery. The incarceration system in the U.S. may be described just as another extreme negative result of capitalism, with cheap laborers functioning as the main product. When comparing the periods of slavery with that of today, Davis, in her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, argues that “the persistence of the prison as the main form of punishment, with its racist and sexist dimensions, has created this historical continuity between the nineteenth and early twentieth-century convict lease system and the privatized prison business today.”¹¹ This problem grew to such heights that the state of the issue in today’s society is indeed shocking because as she states “many people in black, Latino, and Native American communities now have a far greater chance of going to prison than of getting a decent education.”¹² By being outspoken about this issue she directly challenges the system, emphasizing another disappointing point with the U.S. democracy. That is also her reason behind saying that “in the twenty-first century, anti-prison activists insist that a fundamental requirement for the revitalization of democracy is the long-overdue abolition of the prison system”¹³ because the form and conditions of it excessively resemble those of slavery system.

Because of these reasons, her work as an activist writer and the problems she comments on is highly relevant. She became an activist for women and the imprisoned, the parts of the population to this day overlooked and has remained in her role of an unstoppable activist since.

¹⁰ Davis, *An Autobiography*, 111.

¹¹ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 37.

¹² Davis, *Prisons*, 10.

¹³ Davis, *Prisons*, 39.

4 Action as Activism in the New Movement

Although the previous chapters focused mainly on the literature as a direct instrument of the movement, the movement in the streets did not die completely. There have been many protests and demonstrations that have taken place in the U.S. since the 1970s. For example, the Million Man March, Million Woman March, Ferguson Unrest and the biggest one in the history of the U.S., the Black Lives Matter/George Floyd protests.¹ They all were a reaction to the problems of racism in the democratic country, which include police brutality, mass incarceration, stereotypical portrayals of African Americans and the overall place of African American women in U.S. society. For this reason, the following chapters will focus on one of the pivotal figures of the action in the streets, Al Sharpton, whose experiences from the original movement made him an inseparable persona from the notion of street activism.

The new era opened new possibilities for the movement and its structure. The spreading of a message became more straightforward, and so did reaching the audience. Social media made the complex core of the problem of racism more approachable and, therefore, easier to understand. According to a survey done by *Pew Research Centre*, “certain groups of social media users – most notably, those who are black or Hispanic – view these platforms as an especially important tool for their own political engagement.”² In this sense, it was precisely the social media that made the Black Lives Matter movement like no other which will also be addressed in the following chapters concerning the hashtag inventor, Patrisse Cullors.

¹ Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

² Monica Anderson, et al., “Activism in the Social Media Age,” *Pew Research Centre*, accessed July 17, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/11/activism-in-the-social-media-age/>.

4.1 The Case of Al Sharpton

When Reverend Al Sharpton was attending one of the marches for the anniversary of the “I Have a Dream” speech, an older man approached him, telling him that “the march ain’t over.”¹ This sentence does not only describe the circumstances of the problem of racism in the U.S., but most importantly, the phrase is more than fitting for the description of the attitude of Sharpton himself. “The march ain’t over” for him; it has never been, in fact.

His activist career began as early as in his high school years, by the end of the Civil Rights Movement when he was working under Jesse Jackson on operation Breadbasket, which positioned him at the center of the “main action.” Moreover, working with Jesse Jackson tied him directly to the original movement and Martin Luther King Jr. Therefore, it can be argued that he was at the center of the action from the beginning. According to Wayne D’Orio, “from his social activism around the subway shooting of four black teenagers in 1984 to eulogizing Michael Jackson at his funeral in 2009, the Reverend Alfred Charles Sharpton Jr. has been front and center in the most heated civil rights cases.”²

Many outstanding personas have influenced him since his childhood. However, the ones who influenced him the most and helped him to become the person the activist he is today are Adam Clayton Powell, Jesse Jackson, and lastly, James Brown. Powell, a famous preacher at that time, served as an important influence for Sharpton in the early period of his preaching career. Being influenced by one of Powell’s books made Sharpton so inspired that he wanted to meet the man in person. The meeting was successful and was probably one of the most important events that directed his future life and career.

According to Sharpton,

It was the most incredible exhibition of power that I’ve ever seen, with people from every walk of life, including the top business and show and sports people that you’d see in the Amsterdam News and on TV, coming up to him one by one seeking favors or just to pay their respects, having little meetings and huddles with him all afternoon. I knew then what I wanted to be, that’s when the other shoe dropped.³

Another important influence in his life, as already stated, was Jesse Jackson, for whom Sharpton worked and who remained his mentor throughout his life. His influence is important

¹ Al Sharpton, *Righteous Troublemakers: Untold Stories of the Social Justice Movement in America* (New York: Hanover Square Press, 2022), 9.

² Wayne D’Orio, *Al Sharpton: Civil Rights Leader* (New York: Chelsea House, 2011), 3.

³ D’Orio, *Al Sharpton*, 10.

because his speeches were similar to those of Martin Luther King Jr. Therefore, through this link, the activism of Sharpton can be compared to that of King himself from the period of the original movement. For example, in his address, Jackson, same as King, used various religious references. Sharpton argues that during one of Jesse's addresses, "he whipped the crowd into a frenzy. I remember it as if it was yesterday. [...] Jesse didn't even need a microphone. He delivered the keynote speech but, with his voice full of the spirit of God, it sounded more like a good, old-fashioned, rollicking sermon."⁴ This type of register was more than familiar for Sharpton, who was a preacher himself.

It was not only the admiration of Jackson that led Sharpton to an appreciation of Dr King, but he indeed had a great part in it because he later focused his whole career and persona on King's and Jackson's tradition.

In Sharpton's words,

I created a more formal organization, one dedicated to the King tradition, [...] It's what Jesse Jackson did in Chicago and Dr. King had done, too: the weekends give enough time for people to come together for mass and then afterward to organize for community action work. I worked to get the Black radio stations to broadcast us live on the weekends—Dr. King did something similar and used the Black church and the Black radio as his community outreach program and megaphone both.⁵

Therefore, his whole work functions in the spirit of Jackson and, most importantly, Dr King. That is also why he is so inclined toward the notion of non-violent activism, which, as already discussed in the first part of the thesis, was the core spirit of Dr King's activism.

The last significant influence in his life was the singer, "The Godfather of Soul," James Brown. As cited by D'Orio, when first meeting the man, Sharpton stated, "I was awed [...] When I was a kid, I thought that when I'd seen Adam Clayton Powell, I'd seen God, but after I saw James Brown, I knew I'd seen God."⁶ Although Brown was not a preacher or associated directly with the movement, he helped to shape not only the person Sharpton has become but also helped him financially support his organizations as a reward for Sharpton's help.⁷ All these experiences resulted in Sharpton's persona of a never-stopping, ever-present activist, which is also shown by his active contributions to the "New Movement."

His first major march was organized to protest the death of Griffin in 1986. He organized rallies and news conferences to spread awareness about the racial attack. In

⁴ Sharpton, *Righteous Troublemakers*, 92.

⁵ Sharpton, *Righteous Troublemakers*, 92.

⁶ D'Orio, *Al Sharpton*, 15.

⁷ D'Orio, *Al Sharpton*, 15.

Sharpton's words, "this was extremely important to me personally because it symbolized my transition from working with and leading young people to leading adults. I looked around and saw all those adults in their cars [...] and I thought, I can do something."⁸ Because of his hard work, the case was properly examined and, in the end, "five whites [were] being indicted on charges of murder and manslaughter."⁹

His current activism is still similar, marching where there is a reason to and shining the light on the discrimination and racism in the U.S. From among the most famous campaigns, for example, he was a part of the Black Lives Matter march, protests in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and many others. The influential people mentioned changed his attitude towards the justice system in the U.S. and are still an inspiration to him. As he reminisces, "Reverend Jesse Jackson once told me something I've never forgotten. He said, 'Al, it's bad enough to be enslaved. What's worse is when you accept it.' If you think of yourself as a second-class citizen, that your life doesn't matter, then I may as well say your eulogy, too. We have got to break that mental bondage."¹⁰ He remains to share the same attitude, which can be seen in his approach toward non-violent activism.

⁸ D'Orio, *Al Sharpton*, 22.

⁹ D'Orio, *Al Sharpton*, 23.

¹⁰ Sharpton, *Righteous Troublemakers*, 89.

4.2 The Case of Patrisse Cullors

The problems of police brutality, incarceration and racially motivated violence are among the ones that result from ages-old racism and are the current problems that the people of the Afro-American community are facing in the U.S. and fighting against. The Black Lives Matter movement was founded to spotlight the said injustices and start a fight against them. The beginning of the movement traces back to 2013, the response to an infamous case when George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of a young African American boy, Trayvon Martin. However, it became well known only later, and the movement is most famously associated with the murder of George Floyd by one of the police officers. Its impressive start with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media predicted that the movement would be like no other.

Patrisse Cullors was one of the three women behind the starting action of the movement. Growing up in the average African American household of a lower class made her more than aware of the problems that her community was facing. However, the issues became personal when her brother, Monte, who was suffering from bipolar disorder, was arrested and shared his experiences from jail. As Cullors states, her brother “claims he was choked and that he blacked out and woke up in a pool of blood. Abusive treatment continued [...] when he was moved to the Twin Towers jail downtown.”¹ This experience convinced her to take action because, as she found out, brutality in jails was not an uncommon experience for the prisoners. She claims that “there are many Montes in Los Angeles County. People like John Horton, who died in his cell in solitary confinement in 2009. [...] Or Juan Correa, who last fall was pepper sprayed after an altercation with another prisoner, according to authorities, and then “went into distress” in the shower. Paramedics pronounced him dead.”² This was the first event that ensured her that there was something wrong with the justice system in the country and that action needed to be taken. However, it was not only after the murder of a young Afro-American boy, Trayvon Martin, and the following acquittal of the aggressor George Zimmerman that the movement was born. And like the other movements, this too was born from anger coming from racism and injustice. Alicia Garza, another founder of the movement, looked on Facebook after the news of the acquittal, and the responses and

¹ Patrisse Cullors, “My Brother’s Abuse in Jail is a Reason I Co-founded Black Lives Matter. We need reform in L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-cullors-los-angeles-sheriff-jail-reform-20180413-story.html>.

² Cullors, “My Brother’s Abuse.”

comments that she found were shocking. She states that “many of the responses ‘were blaming black people for our own conditions,’ [...] ‘It wasn't Trayvon Martin's fault that (Zimmerman) stopped him and murdered him. [...] It really has to do with a society that has a really sick disease, and that disease is racism.’”³ After that, she wrote an article addressed to African Americans, “urging them to come together to ensure ‘that black lives matter.’”⁴ Cullors then came to aid and added a hashtag before this slogan; thus, another movement was born. As already stated, the original Civil Rights Movement started with an action of a woman, Rosa Parks. Unlike the previous one, this sub-movement started not with the action only but with the words of women. Therefore, this shows that one should not underestimate the power of words. Žižek said that “words are never ‘only words’; they matter because they define the contours of what we can do.”⁵ In this case, these three words started the movement and sparked a massive action.

According to Guynn,

the hashtag spread so quickly on social media because it distilled the complexities of police brutality, racial inequality, and social justice ‘into a simple, easy to remember slogan that fits in a Tweet or on a T-shirt [...] The hashtag leaped from social media to the streets, mobilizing a new wave of civil rights protests in the U.S. with the killings of Martin, Oscar Grant, Michael Brown and Eric Garner. [...] In marches, sit-ins and rallies across the country, protesters have shouted the slogan, plastered it on posters and printed it on T-shirts. It was even featured on an episode of Law & Order.’⁶

It did not take long for the words to spread worldwide and the movement to become international. When comparing this state of the movement with the previous one from the 1960s, one may ask what is different and what has changed. The answer is simple, as McKesson asks an important question “who is the spokesperson? The people. The people in a very democratic way became the voice of the struggle.”⁷ His answer is in the spirit of the previously discussed essay by Audrie Lord, “Learning from the 60s.” There needed to be a change because people could no longer follow one representative, one spokesman who became the image of a movement; therefore, the people became the movement itself.

³ Jessica Guynn, “Meet the Woman who Coined #BlackLivesMatter,” *USA Today*, March 4, 2015, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/03/04/alicia-garza-black-lives-matter/24341593/>.

⁴ Guynn, “Meet the Woman.”

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 109.

⁶ Guynn, “Meet the Woman.”

⁷ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BLACKLIVESMATTER to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 184, epub.

The years of fight resulted in the simple but meaningful motto that black lives matter. The movement was built on the shoulders of other activists, and as in the previous cases, the older activists served as a direct inspiration for the current, younger ones. One of the many people who influenced Cullors in her fight against racism is already discussed, Angela Davis. According to Cullors, Davis' "political theories and reflections on anti-capitalist movements around the world have sought not only to transform U.S. society by challenging white supremacy in U.S. laws, institutions, and relationships but also to act as a catalyst toward building a broader antiracist and anti-war movement internationally."⁸

The anticapitalistic approach is also the main reason for the often-negative attitude not only to Davis and Cullors but also to the Black Lives Matter movement itself. Cullors, same as Davis, is openly Marxist and, therefore, similarly to Davis, she favors the utopic portrayals of society without racism and discrimination, which those theories provide. She argues that "reading those social philosophers provided a new understanding around what our economies could look like."⁹ These theories may function as a significant criticism of capitalism; however, they do not offer the solutions needed, and for that reason, they are easily discredited for their negatively perceived image of a society that is simply too utopic to be true. When Žižek was asked in an interview how he would describe the relationship between liberal capitalism and racism and about the possibility of having a functional capitalist nation-state without some form of racism, he responded with the following: "It's a complex question because, of course, radical leftists would have said no, it's not possible. Capitalism always needs racism. But it's not absolutely necessary."¹⁰ Even if it is not necessary, capitalism, in a sense, thrives with the combination of racism. The need for a change is evident, and there may be a combination of solutions for this: Marxist theories, approached by Davis and Cullors as one of them, while a completely new notion which would change the nation's political state completely, being the other. What is essential in Cullors' words is that "whatever political change we advocate for, it must address and settle this dilemma of global U.S. state violence,

⁸ Patrisse Cullors, "Abolition and Reparations: Histories of Resistance, Transformative Justice, And Accountability," *Harvard Law Review*, published April 10, 2019, accessed July 21, 2022, <https://harvardlawreview.org/2019/04/abolition-and-reparations-histories-of-resistance-transformative-justice-and-accountability/>.

⁹ Aric Jenkins, "Black Lives Matter Co-Founder Patrisse Cullors on Her Memoir, Her Life and What's Next for the Movement," *The Time*, February 26, 2018, <https://time.com/5171270/black-lives-matter-patrisse-cullors/>.

¹⁰ Samo Burja, "Slavoj Žižek: Coronavirus, Black Lives Matter, and Revolution," *Big Think*, published June 30, 2020, accessed July 21, 2022, <https://samoburja.com/slavoj-zizek-coronavirus-black-lives-matter-and-revolution/>.

injustice, and devastation.”¹¹ For this reason, the movement’s primary goal is a fight for change and the discreditation of the whole movement because of some communist argument is simply irrelevant because the actual reality is much more complex, as discussed here and in the chapter of Davis.

Cullors’ journey as an activist is indeed extraordinary when considering the start of the movement that became one of the largest movements in U.S. history.¹² What is more, the influential people and her circumstances made her aware of the problems of the Afro-American community. Because of that, she chose an entirely new approach to establishing and operating a movement. The approach has shown that social networks can be used in an effective way to support a cause for a change. For these reasons, the hashtag Black Lives Matter is known worldwide and functioned as a great way to present the current problems of the U.S. to the world.

The fight, however, is still not over, and Cullors is well aware of that when she states,

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. The members of our movement are called terrorists. We—me, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi—the three women who founded Black Lives Matter, are called terrorists. We, the people. We are not terrorists. I am not a terrorist. I am Patrisse Marie Khan-Cullors Brignac. I am a survivor. I am stardust.¹³

¹¹ Cullors, “Abolition and Reparations.”

¹² Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

¹³ Patrisse Cullors, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 13.

5 Conclusion

The main argument of this thesis is that the Civil Rights Movement did not really end in the 1960s but that it, in fact, continues to the present day. The original Civil Rights Movement had left many things concerning the position of African Americans in the U.S. unresolved. What is more, the perception of African Americans stayed the same in the minds of the majority. For this reason, the thesis has sought to explore the ways in which the new movement evolved and what issues it has been fighting against. The movement in the present era expanded not only through various media, but what is more, it expanded worldwide. The problem of the U.S. was put out for the whole world to see; because of the consequences of racism, the picture of ideal democracy became flawed, and the “city upon a hill”¹ just a story of the past. This is thanks to the never-ending work of many activists, some of whom are the focus of this thesis, such as Angela Davis and Toni Morrison, along with Al Sharpton and Patrisse Cullors.

The first part of the thesis focuses on the original Civil Rights Movement through the eyes (or, better said, notions) of Martin Luther King Jr, James Baldwin, and Malcolm X. The figures that at that time served as the prominent faces of the movement and therefore became its leaders. Each of them, however, shared a different part in the fight for civil rights. As King was the advocate of non-violent action, Malcolm X, on the other hand, was known for his more aggressive approach, and with James Baldwin, who is situated in the middle of the said approaches, their personas became inseparable from the period. The movement with its leaders became an important point in history. However, to ensure that history does not repeat itself, there was a need for a change, a transformation, of the approach to the civil rights struggle because there are still things to be just resolved and other problems to be emphasized.

Therefore, the second part of the thesis focuses on this transformation, more precisely, on the “new” movement. The first point of this part concerns the use of literature as a medium for activism. The comparison between Angela Davis and Toni Morrison has shown that because of the rise of readership, the movement became more accessible. It also became easier for writers to write about disturbing themes because people started to be interested in the life struggles of African American community. Both writers proved this in their own way.

¹ John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in *A Library of American Literature: Early Colonial Literature, 1607-1675*, ed. Edmund C. Stedman and Ellen M. Hutchinson (New York: Ch. L. Webster & Company, 1892), 307.

Morrison with fiction, where she applies postmodern storytelling techniques, while Davis with non-fiction works where she focuses on the problems of the black community while offering a Marxist perspective. Both writers also incorporate the struggles of the minority population within the minority, those of women. Their problems have been more than often overlooked. Because of this, they both challenge the old image of an Afro-American female, which has been contrasted with that of a white woman and emphasize just how damaging these portrayals and contrasts are.

The second point of this part focuses on the change in an approach to the “action” side of the movement. The comparison concerns Al Sharpton and Patrisse Cullors, who represent the active movement “in the streets.” In this sense, Sharpton remains one of the most known activists whose presence has been noticed in many protests since the original movement. He remains faithful to his influencers, mainly the teachings of Jesse Jackson and Dr King, which can be seen in his preference to appear personally in the streets while adapting the notion of non-violent protests. He, too, coming from a preaching background, only shows what an essential role his mentors played in his activism.

On the other hand, Patrisse Cullors is genuinely an activist of the new era. She, famously, along with two other women, started a sub-movement because of three influential words that Black Lives Matter. She derives her motivation and the purpose of her activism not only from personal experiences but also from the people that she looks upon, such as Angela Davis. Because of this, she also focuses on a problem such as mass incarceration. In the same way as Davis, Cullors also favors Marxist teaching and applies them to the situation of African American community in the U.S. It was because of her dependence on social media that the Black Lives Matter movement became one of the biggest in the U.S.

The thesis shows that the struggle of African Americans did not really end, and with it, the movement still lives on. In this sense, Coretta Scott King once said that “struggle is a never-ending process. Freedom is never really won; you earn it and win it in every generation.”² The story of this fight has been spreading through generations, and it surely will be for a couple of more because racism is still deeply embedded in people’s minds. Only by feeding the hatred did it grow to such an extent, and it was the nation state that also played a big part in it. The only thing that remains is the question yet to be answered. How many generations will have to deal with this fight until people can truly be equal?

² Larry Chang and Roderick Terry, *Wisdom for the Soul of Black Folk* (Washington: Gnosophia Publishers, 2007), 324.

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