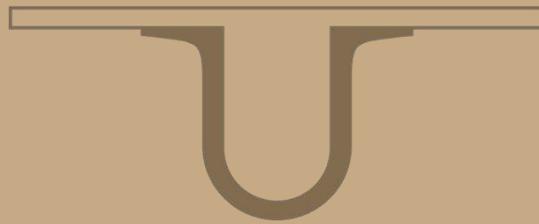




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**AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT FICTION AND THE
FIGHT FOR RIGHTS**

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RESUMO

Ficção juvenil afro-americana e a luta pelos direitos

Black Lives Matter é um movimento de protesto que surgiu em 2013, despoletado pela morte de Trayvon Martin, um adolescente negro alvejado por um agente da polícia branco. O agente, George Zimmerman, foi absolvido o que suscitou o protesto da comunidade afro-americana. Este não foi o primeiro nem o último caso do uso de brutalidade policial contra afro-americanos, uma vez que a supremacia branca e o racismo ainda estão muito presentes nos E.U.A. Muitos artistas afro-americanos começaram a usar a sua arte (música, literatura, cinema, etc.) como uma forma de protesto contra as injustas mortes de adolescentes negros. Numa longa tradição de protesto desde os tempos da escravatura, Angie Thomas, Nic Stone e Jay Coles, são três jovens escritores afro-americanos que escreveram romances infanto-juvenis que denunciam a identificação por perfil racial e a violência policial e sensibilizam jovens (negros e brancos). *The Hate U Give* (2017), *Dear Martin* (2017) e *Tyler Johnson Was Here* (2018) são, respetivamente, os romances selecionados como exemplos do papel que a ficção infanto-juvenil pode ter como instrumento político para promover a auto-consciência, a auto-estima e a capacitação de adolescentes negros. Analisar estes romances exigiu uma contextualização numa experiência afro-americana mais vasta, na questão do racismo nos Estados Unidos e também na luta dos afro-americanos por um lugar no cânone literário. Com esta dissertação o meu objetivo é sensibilizar as pessoas para a violência contra os negros existente nos Estados Unidos da América.

Palavras-chave: Ficção juvenil; *Black Lives Matter*; cultura afro-americana; racismo; direitos civis; cânone literário americano.

ABSTRACT

African-American Young Adult Fiction and the Fight for Rights

Black Lives Matter is a protest movement that began in 2013 triggered by the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager who was murdered by a white police officer. The police officer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted from his crimes which raised the protest within

the African-American community. This was neither the first nor the last case of police brutality against African-Americans since white supremacy and racism are still very present in the U.S.A. Many African-American artists started using their art (music literature, cinema, etc.) as a form of protest against the unjust deaths of black teenagers. Following a long tradition of protest since slavery times, Angie Thomas, Nic Stone and Jay Coles, three young African-American writers wrote Young Adult novels as a way of denouncing racial profiling and state violence and raising social awareness among young people (black and white). *The Hate U Give* (2017), *Dear Martin* (2017) and *Tyler Johnson Was Here* (2018) are, respectively, the novels I selected as examples of the role YAF may have as a political tool for African-American teenagers' self-awareness, self-esteem and empowerment. Analysing these novels required a contextualization in a larger African-American experience, American racism and the struggle of African Americans to conquer a space in the American literary canon that was majorly white. With this dissertation my aim is to raise awareness to the ongoing violence against black people in the United States of America.

Keywords: Young Adult Fiction (YAF); *Black Lives Matter*; African-American culture; racism; civil rights; American literary canon.

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INTRODUCTION “Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed on Aug. 9, 2014, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. The shooting prompted protests that roiled the area for weeks.” (Buchanan, 2015)

Being of African descent myself, I am interested in questions regarding the African Diaspora worldwide, however, before becoming a university student, there were some issues I had never really thought about regarding the African-American Diaspora. I knew about slavery, I knew there was still a lot of racism in the United States, but only when confronted with the story of 18-year old Michael Brown and his shooting on August 9, 2014, did I understand how complex the African-American experience was and still is in the United States.

It is not clear what happened in the night Michael Brown was shot by Darren Wilson. According to BBC (Clarke and Lett, 2014) there are multiple sides to the story. In general lines, Michael and his friend Dorian Johnson were on their way home after leaving a convenience store at night when Darren Wilson stopped them in the street. Some claim Michael Brown had shoplifted in the convenience store and that he was aggressive towards Darren Wilson, therefore the police officer acted according to the protocol; others, including Dorian Johnson, claim that the police officer abused his power and was unnecessarily violent towards Johnson and Brown although both of them tried to cooperate. Regardless of who was telling the truth, it was proven that Michael Brown was unarmed, thus, the public opinion questioned whether Darren Wilson had or had not resorted to extreme measures by fatally shooting Michael Brown six times for shoplifting (“Profile: Ferguson Shooting...”). Throughout the years I realized Michael Brown’s shooting was not the first nor the last case of unarmed black and teenagers or young adults being killed by police officers, who are usually white. Perhaps it is important to go back to what some call the first “Black Lives Matter story” (Chamberlain, 2017), the tragic story of Emmett Till in order to understand what is happening in the 21st century.

While looking at the history of African-Americans, one name that will certainly appear is Emmett Till’s. In 1896 the “separate but equal” doctrine was implemented through the Plessy v. Ferguson case, making segregation legal (Jager). Although one of the key words was “equal”, the South was greatly divided, and it surely was not equal. In his biographical piece “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” (1937), Richard Wright was able to show how different life was for black people in a segregated South. when it was demanded of him to call white people by “sir” regardless of age, while he was reduced to a “boy” even if he was older than who was addressing him (Wright, ch. 3); where black men would be physically punished for interacting with white

women (ch. 7). The episodes of his life narrated in this text were later expanded into the first volume of his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), where he also narrates that, as a black young man he was not allowed to envisage a future as a writer.

Unlike Wright, Emmett Till had been born and raised in the North, therefore, he was most likely unaware of the racial etiquette of Jim Crow, when he went to spend his summer vacation at his grandfather's house in Money, Mississippi. Most narratives claim that Emmett Till, who was just 14 whistled at a white woman called Carolyn Bryant. Bryant complained about the boy to her husband and his brother who decided to punish Emmett Till themselves. For having acted the wrong way towards a white woman, Emmett ended up being murdered. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, Carolyn's husband and brother, searched for the boy at his uncle's home and beat him up until his body was disfigured. After this they shot him and tossed his body into the Tallahatchie river attached to a cotton-gin fan and laced his neck with barbed wire in order to weigh him down.

According to the information displayed in the National Museum of African American History and Culture's website, Emmett Till's white assailants, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, believed that they were protecting Carolyn Bryant's womanhood by taking what they thought to be justice into their own hands. Jewell Parker Rhodes argues that most narratives about what Emmett allegedly told or did to Bryant imply that he "invited his punishment" (2018: 205).

However, in 2007, more than sixty years after Emmett Till's death, 72 -year-old Carolyn Bryant admitted to Timothy Tyson who was doing a research on Emmett's death for his book, "The Blood of Emmett Till", that none of her claims about Emmett Till were true (Weller, 2017). Moreover Bryant also said that "Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him" (Rhodes, 2005: 206). Then, what could possibly make Carolyn Bryant accuse a 14-year-old boy? What made Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam feel entitled to take justice into their own hands? What led two adult men to lynch a 14-year-old child?

In the 2005 documentary film "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till" (Beauchamp, 00:22:56-00:23:11), Mamie Till tells that Sheriff Strider intended on burying Emmett Till's remains right after they found his body in the river, believing the Sheriff wanted to divert the world's eyes from the violence of that murder. As Emmett had been laid on a box that was nailed after, no

one could see what was inside it. However, Mamie Till pressured the funeral home to open the box and put her son's body inside a proper casket. Emmett's body had been beaten in such way that it was identified only by a ring with his initials on it. Upon seeing her son's body, Mamie Till decided that his casket would be open so everyone would see the amount of hatred that was put into the killing of Emmett Till; and so justice could be done for her son: "I believe that the whole United States this morning is with me and if the death of my son can mean something to the other unfortunate people all over the world, then for him to have died a hero would mean more to me than for him to just have died." (Beauchamp, 00:30:24-00:30:40).

Emmett Till's devastated mother intended to make her son's violent death a political call to action:

"It's my opinion that the guilt begins with Mrs. Bryant and I wanna see Mrs. Bryant punished, her husband, and any other persons that were in on this thing. And I feel like the pressure should start from the President of the United States and be channelled all the way down to the township of Money, Mississippi. And I'm certainly of the opinion that in as much as my son had to die that I don't want his death to be a vain thing. If it can further the cause of freedom then I would say that he died a hero"(Mamie Till, Beauchamp; 00:34:02-00:34:35)

As well as shocking, the images of Emmett Till's body were a proof of centuries of violence against black people (*Emmett Till's Death Inspired a Movement*), a proof that the doctrine "separate but equal" was not put into practice (Constitutional rights were still be defrauded if the doctrine was followed) and a proof that black people, especially black children and teenagers, were not being protected by the U.S.A's law, since Emmett Till's murderers ended up being acquitted from their crimes, despite later admitting to them on the *Look* magazine (*Emmett Till's Death Inspired a Movement*). Emmett's case proved that even if the whole town of Money knew who the murderers were they would rather protect the murderers instead of black children and teenagers (Beauchamp, 00:42:15-00:42:49). Jewell P. Rhodes argues that "It is tragic when adults, who are meant to protect children, instead betray a children's innocence. One death impacts us all." (Rhodes, 2018: 205).

Some might have criticized Mamie Till by mediating and exposing her son's body, however, people like Bryan Stevenson and Reverend Al Sharpton agree that by doing so, Mamie Till was confronting the USA with its "ugly racial problem" through the insertion of a child's corpse image in the USA's collective mind. The Equal Justice Initiative founder and lawyer Bryan

Stevenson even argues that “the juxtaposition of a little boy in a suit and a tie with his battered face was a stark image that made it really impossible for anyone who saw it to be silent about it.” But Mamie Till surely managed to have the whole USA talking about her son’s case and making people act against the injustices that black parents and black children and teenagers had been going through for centuries. One may even say Mamie Till stopped the deaths of thousand other black children and teenagers by indirectly pushing into the spread of the Civil Rights Movement (*The Body Of Emmett Till*, 00:02:09-00:02:12, 00-03:43-00:03:53; Beauchamp, 00:29:58-00:30:23, 00:32:26-00:32:52). Rosa Parks became the Montgomery Bus Boycott’s main figure, motivated by Emmett Till’s story. Segregation in schools ended after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case took place, later leading to the end of segregation in the whole country. The African-American community was slowly gaining more freedom and more rights. In 2008 the United States got its first black President. After such a tragic death like Emmett Till’s and after the many victories achieved by the Civil Right fighters, it would be expected for racial equality to be achieved, however, more than sixty years later, African-Americans are dying at the hands of racism.

Two years before Michael Brown’s death in 2014, another unarmed black teenager, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, had been killed by the police officer George Zimmerman who claimed to have been attacked by Martin (February 26, 2012). Despite the confirmation that Trayvon Martin was unarmed when Zimmerman shot him, after being charged for 2nd degree murder, the officer ended up being acquitted of the crimes he was accused of (“Trayvon Martin – Biography”). This and other fatal incidents triggered Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors and Opal Tometi to start the *Black Lives Matter* Movement (BLM) (*Black Lives Matter | Herstory*). The internet played and still plays a big part in the spread of these police brutality news as #BlackLivesMatter started as a hashtag on social networks such as *Twitter* and *Tumblr* in 2013. The movement really gained national recognition after people went to the streets of St. Louis and Ferguson in the United States following Michael Brown’s shooting. As more news of police brutality against black people kept surfacing, more hashtags were created to bring awareness online¹.

¹ Hashtags were formed through the use of the victims’ names (e.g.: #MikeBrown, #TamirRice). One thing that contributes to this digital form of protest is the fact that some of these cases come followed by videos of the incidents filmed by witnesses. Besides working as legal proof, the online community often uses sentences or words uttered by the victims in the video. For example, while Eric Garner was being tackled by a NYPD officer, Garner kept repeating “I can’t breathe”, therefore #ICantBreathe became one of the most popular hashtags. Some may speak against the use of hashtags online since it might seem people are reducing the victims to a hashtag, whereas others may be in favour since hashtags can be at the reach of a click, therefore making the movement known worldwide.

Although one of the main goals of the *Black Lives Matter* movement is to peacefully ask for the end of police brutality, some think the movement is fully against white people or the police institution as a whole or that the African-Americans killed by these police officers opposed real threats to their lives. While these people – mainly white but not exclusively – claim some police officers in the United States have misused their authority, there are also those who defend the white police officers involved in the incidents. Subsequently, they created the following hashtags: #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. There is still another group of people left: those who believe that #BlackLivesMatter is exclusive and divides people, arguing that everyone’s lives matter, forgetting that the movement’s main goal is to end violence against African-American people in particular.

In light of these current events, adjacent to the *Black Lives Matter* demonstrations on the streets, in social networks and other spaces, many African-American writers have been releasing stories about children and teenagers like Emmett Till and Michael Brown. Angie Thomas, who is part of this group of writers, in the Author’s Note at the end of her book *The Hate U Give* (2017), explains what brought her to write a book about *Black Lives Matter*. Moved by Emmett Till’s story and later Oscar Grant, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and other young black people who died at the hands of white supremacism, Thomas decided to write a story to which young black people could relate to, by giving them a voice (Author's Note). Thomas’ novel’s title was inspired by the rapper Tupac’s idea that THUG LIFE translates to “The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody” (Reid, 2018). Children and teenagers are often discredited for being so young, however, when tragedies occur, they are the ones who take on the biggest toll.

This is why I want to claim in this dissertation that literature, namely Young Adult (YA) Fiction, can be a way through which racism, police brutality and other forms of violence can be fought against. In other words, I believe YA Fiction can aid people in their political fights. In order to fulfil this task, I will be looking at Angie Thomas’ YA novel as well as at two other novels written by other African-American authors: *Dear Martin* (2017) by Nic Stone and *Tyler Johnson Was Here* (2018) by Jay Coles. The writers are all black and young, therefore, they can relate to their stories well. I believe these novels cover many themes that can be easily identified in real life and that are recognizable in the stories of the many victims of police brutality.

I will divide this dissertation into three chapters. Since the books I chose to analyse are written by African-American authors about current aspects of the African-American experience, I felt the need to contextualize them into a larger African-American experience, therefore, in the first chapter I will try to find a reason as to why racism is insoluble by explaining how African-

Americans have been going through a history of struggle when it comes to both citizenship and justice. In the same chapter I will look into white people's accountability in situations where white supremacy is the foundation of people's preconceived ideas about black people and people of color in general. In the second chapter I will look into Young Adult Fiction (YAF) and African-American literature. First, I will see why Young Adult Fiction is not usually the object of attention of literary critics and I will show how it can be political. Then I will look into how the African-American literary canon and tradition were formed, followed by a section in which I see explore how critics saw the tradition of protest and if the three novels I am analysing can fit into that tradition. Finally, I will pick up on *The Hate U Give*, *Dear Martin* and *Tyler Johnson Was Here*² and summarize their main themes, then, I will show how the main characters are represented and how they deal with their identities when it comes to race, class, age and gender. At last, I will compare the novels and point out similarities, that may also be interchangeable with real life situations, and differences in terms point of views and endings. My aim with this last chapter is show why these novels are important, why they were written and why books like these are being released.

² I will later refer to the novels as *THUG*, *DM* and *TJWH* for practical purposes.

I – THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

- **The History of a Struggle for Rights of Citizenship**

I think it is safe to say that the history of the African-American people has been one of ups and downs. The African-American journey began tragically with the removal of Africans from their homelands in order to be sold into slavery. Multiple measures were created by state legislators and white slave masters in the U.S.A. to keep African slaves subjugated and maintain the institution of slavery³.

Although there were ongoing discussions amongst the Founding Fathers as to whether slavery should be abolished or not since it was a “heritage” left by Great Britain, it was decided that slavery should continue to exist since it benefits the country’s economy. Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol explain that basically US’s economy only prospered due to slave labor:

As the architect of the Declaration of Independence, and a slave owner, Thomas Jefferson must have been conflicted when he wrote: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Arthur (1989) contends that Jefferson reconciled this contradiction through a pragmatic perspective—that slavery was necessary because Africans were inferior and “the economic and political consequences” of abolition made slavery a necessary evil. (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, p. 23)

This quote shows how preserving the country’s economy was more valuable than the lives of African-American people subjugated to forced labor. Decisions were deliberately made to keep exploiting black people in favour of not only the government, but also in favour of individual interests since many of the white men in the government were slaveowners. These men seemed to be completely aware of their contradictions and their decisions, as noted above, however, they still felt the need to implement them, so they attempted to justify them. Thomas Jefferson, for example, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1853) tries to justify slavery by belittling black people. He downplays their intellect and humanity by comparing them to animals who act through instinct and imitation. Because in his perspective black people were animal-like,

³ One of the main examples is how slavery was made of what Feagin (p. 56) calls “superexploitation of both productive and reproductive labor”. This benefited whites alone, as black slaves were solely chattel through which whites could achieve their economic gains.

they were, therefore, inferior to white people whom he considered to be the most intelligent race, the superior race. Jefferson's reasoning was repeated throughout history since it was more convenient for white people to justify black people's inferiority than to justify their own cruelty towards other human beings.

Black people were thus excluded from the final version of the Declaration of Independence and also the Constitution when it came to freedom and citizenship. Their only contribution to the federal Union, which was not recognized as such, was given through forced labor and demographic numbers for taxation and representation purposes. However, even in this case, black slaves were dehumanized since each of them was only worth 3/5 of a person (Fredrickson, 2003: 1). Had it not been for the smaller population in some states, which left whites in disadvantage in terms of representation in the federal institutions, slaves would probably have not been counted as persons at all.⁴ The Section 1 of the Naturalization Act of 1790 below shows how only free white people could become citizens of the U.S.A:

Section 1. Be it enacted by the *Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled*, That any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof, on application to any common law court of record, in any of the states wherein he shall have resided for the term of one year at least, and making proof to the satisfaction of such court, that he is a person of good character (...) and thereupon such person shall be considered as a citizen of the United States. And the children of such persons so naturalized, dwelling within the United States, being under the age of twenty-one at the time of such naturalization, shall also be considered as citizens of the United States. (Naturalization Act of 1790)

According to Chambers and Frederickson (2003: p. 1), there seemed to be no clear definition in the Constitution of what being an American citizen meant but it the Congress was allowed to decide on what ground could people become citizens (Chambers, 2013: 500; Fredrickson, 2003: p. 1). As stated in Mitchell (2007: p. 839) and Fredrickson (2003: p. 1) citizenship was generally acquired through means of birth (illustrated by the *jus soli* doctrine) or naturalization. Fredrickson (2003: p. 1) explains that there were not many pre-requisites to become a U.S.

⁴ The Three Fifths Compromise was agreed between northern and southern states, in 1787, regarding the counting of a state's population. Counting slaves as 3/5 of a person benefited the southern states as they would have more seats in Congress, giving them more leverage. This was not a matter of taking slaves' humanity into consideration. (U.S. Constitution, Article 1. Section 2. The "Three-Fifths Clause")

citizen, according to the Naturalization Act of 1790. One only needed to be residing in the U.S. for two years, show “good character” and allegiance to the Constitution. In the case of black people not all of them were slaves since there were some free blacks, including individuals who had been born in the country after its Independence. Hence, one would think that citizenship would be granted to them, however, citizenship was only granted to free whites. There was not much contestation against free blacks not being considered citizens since the general idea was that black people were inherently inferior to whites.⁵ According to Fredrickson, "That assumption derived initially and primarily from the association of African ancestry with slavery or enslavability, but rationalizing and mystifying the economic incentive to take advantage of African vulnerability were the phobias and anxieties that came to be associated with physical difference and, especially, dark pigmentation." (Fredrickson, 2003: p. 2)

Although black people were excluded from citizenship, in the Antebellum era there were still some questions regarding the free blacks' position in society but the Dred Scott Decision (1857)⁶ cleared all doubts. In the fourth point of the Supreme Court decision it is said: “A free negro of the African race, whose ancestors were brought to this country and sold as slaves, is not a "citizen" within the meaning of the Constitution of the United States”. Chambers (2013: 502) claims that this case “defined and denied African American citizenship”. Although there was not a great specification about the rights attached to American citizenship, it was clear now that black people could not vote (Fredrickson, 2003: p. 2) and that, in the case of free blacks, they were seen as outsiders (Chambers, 2013: 503) despite being born free. The Dred Scott Decision seemed to be a way of alienating African-Americans in order to keep the country's white supremacy.

There is this idea that the South was pro-slavery and the North was in favour of the abolition of slavery, however, Fredrickson (2003: p. 2) argues that the Northern people who were against slavery actually did not want blacks to “contaminate” white homogeneity. Furthermore, there are still some questions about Lincoln's true intentions regarding the Civil War. Although Lincoln is known as a key figure for the abolition of slavery, there are scholars who believe that the abolition of slavery was only a pretext for Lincoln to keep the Union intact. In fact, Lincoln

⁵ In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson constructs an argument in which he associates laziness, imitation and inferiority to African-Americans. This discourse was naturalized in the national culture.

⁶ Dred Scott was a slave but since he was living in a free state, he filed a suit claiming he was a free man for living where slavery was forbidden. The conclusion of this case was that no black slave or black free man could be an American citizen, therefore, Dred Scott had no right to file a suit in a federal court.

allegedly suggested that African-Americans should consider “moving back” to Africa.⁷ In his view this would benefit both whites and blacks as they would be separated. In addition, the “racial problem” would be over, in his view. Their hypothetical dislocation would mean that they had no right to remain in America and that the comfort of whites would be a priority (cf. Fredrickson, 2008). Yet, this idea ignored the fact that most soon to be freed slaves had no linguistic nor cultural ties to Africa.

In 1865, the North wins the Civil War, and slavery is abolished as stated by the 14th Amendment. Many questions arose about whether African-Americans automatically became citizens or if they were just more free blacks who were seen as outsiders (Chambers, 2013: 487). The South found a way to keep African-Americans subjugated by implementing the Black Codes, which were the Slave Codes just under a new name. The Black Codes were enacted immediately after the 14th Amendment, though varying from state to state, were all intended to secure a steady supply of cheap labor, and all continued to assume the inferiority of the freed blacks: there were vagrancy laws that declared a black to be a vagrant if unemployed and without permanent residence; a person so defined could be arrested, fined, and bound out for a term of labor if unable to pay the fine; apprentice laws provided for the "hiring out" of orphans and other young dependents to whites, who often turned out to be their former owners; some states limited the type of property blacks could own, and in others blacks were excluded from certain businesses or from the skilled trades; former slaves were forbidden to carry firearms or to testify in court, except in cases concerning other blacks; legal marriage between blacks was provided for, but interracial marriage was prohibited. The Black Codes prevented black people from effectively emancipating themselves so that they had no choice but to subjugate to whites. Yet, the Black Codes were followed by the Civil Rights Act promulgated by Congress in 1866 (in spite of having been twice vetoed by President Andrew Jackson), which was the first law that confirmed that all black people were citizens of the US:

(...) all persons born in the United States (...) are hereby declared to be citizens of the United States; and such citizens, of every race and color, without regard to any previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall have the same right, in every State and Territory in the United States (...) as is enjoyed by white citizens.

The veto of President Andrew Johnson, a former slaveholder, and the outrage of the

⁷ One could say Lincoln was considering a re-colonization of Africa, even if it would be voluntary.

Southerners made it necessary to issue a new Amendment. Following these events, in 1868, the citizenship of African-Americans was reinforced by the ratification of the 14th Amendment. The first section of the Amendment seemed to nullify the Dred Scott Decision and gave all black people born in the U.S. the right to citizenship as well as the protection under the law:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges and immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty and property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (“Dred Scott v. Sandford”)

This seemed like good news for African-Americans, especially because right after that came the 15th Amendment which granted them the vote as seen in the first section of the Amendment: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It looked like black people were on the right path to reclaim what should have been inherently theirs instead of being fought for. However, obtaining equal rights was a big challenge. In the 1890s, they were hit by another blow coming from the South: the segregation laws.

Harder to imagine is conferring on African-Americans the degree of respect and recognition that would make them full and equal citizens in substance as well as in law. No other ethnoracial group was enslaved for two-and-a-half centuries in what became the United States, or, despite the attainment of *de jure* citizenship in 1868, was subjected to such an elaborate and comprehensive system of legalized discrimination and segregation (Fredrickson, 2003: p. 23)

The South was separating public spaces in order to stop black people from attending the same spheres as white people. This was emphasized and legalized through the Plessy v. Ferguson decision (1896).⁸ A white passing man⁹, Homer Plessy, sat down on a train carriage that was meant for white people when, according to the court, he should have sat down on the carriage for colored people. This is when the “separate but equal” doctrine emerged. On paper (*de jure*), black people (and other non- whites) had the same rights and privileges as white people,

⁸ This started as a southern measure, but it became a national measure as well.

⁹ We refer to white passing when we talk about people that are of African descent but it is not physically perceptible. This follows up the “One-drop rule” that states that a person who is at least 1/8 African is considered to be black.

however, we will see in a moment that that was not the reality (*de facto*).

One by one, between 1890 and 1910, Southern states effectively nullified the Fifteenth Amendment, passed in 1870, which prohibited denial of the right to vote “on account of race, colour, or previous condition of servitude”. They did so by establishing qualifications for suffrage that made no mention of race but were clearly intended to be used (and were in fact used) to deprive most Southern blacks of access to the ballot box (Fredrickson, 2003: p. 4)

Going back to the 14th Amendment, it actually had enough faults to sustain the oppression of African-Americans. Although it does state that the denial of rights due to race is prohibited, the Amendment does not stop people from finding other ways to discredit African-Americans. According to Fredrickson (2003: p. 4), the lynching of black people happened often both in the South and also in the North. Based on false accusations or on the non-compliance of the Jim Crow Laws, white racists, like the members of the Ku Klux Klan, had a pretext to terrorize black people. One great example is the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till (1955), who was falsely accused of breaking the Jim Crow Laws, just by supposedly having whistled to a white woman, and because of that ended up being brutally murdered.

The discrimination and even segregation of blacks was not, however, exclusive to the South. Because of the oppression present in the South and due to the increasing industrialization of the country fomented by World War I from the mid-1910s till the 1940s many black people took the decision to migrate to the North where there were more employment prospects. This phenomenon is known as the Great Migration. Due to the big influx of African-Americans to the North many whites became hostile to the newcomers not only for obvious racism but also because they were afraid of economic competition.¹⁰ (Brooks, 1996: 48-49). Although it was not institutionalized segregation as in the South, the North created its own informal segregation through the building of what we know now to be the ghettos, in addition to segregation in schools, work, etc. Several cities witnessed racial unrest in the beginning of the 1900s with houses of African-Americans destroyed by white rioters and many blacks attacked and murdered on the streets. There were also black men being coerced to let go of their voting rights, like it happened in the South. Because of this, segregation in the North increased even more than

¹⁰ This competition is hypothetical since black people were not technically prepared and did not benefit from the same opportunities as white people. The majority of employers, if not all, were white people, therefore they would choose white people as their employees. In conclusion, black people would not be able to compete against white people as they were (and some still are) dependent on white people.

it did in the South (Brooks, p. 49). Nevertheless, the North was still a better choice than the South. Therefore, there was a Second Great Migration from the 40s til the 70s. It is estimated that around 6 million African-Americans migrated fom the South to the North and other areas in the U.S.A.

In the last decades of the 19th century and first decades of the 20th century, the lynching of black people in the Southern had become an institutionalized method used by whites to terrorize blacks and maintain white supremacy. During the period 1880 to 1940, white mobs turned to “lynch law” as a means of social control. In order to gain support for the New Deal coalition, many congressmen from the North voted for anti-lynching legislation and against the nomination of racist nominees for Supreme Court positions. They also granted black people other benefits so that they would vote for them. Still, these measures did not grant further benefits to African-Americans nor did they eventually amount to equal citizenship as white Southerners were also part of the Coalition. In addition, the majority of working blacks were servants and farm labourers in the South who were excluded from the protection of social security, thus pushing them away even further from citizenship benefits that the North could offer (Fredrickson, 2003: 7).

In the 1940s multiple movements for Civil Rights for black people came to life, but only in the 50s and 60s did they really take off. As we know, it was during these two decades that crucial decisions regarding the lives of black people were made. Segregation was still very much present everywhere in the South due to its reinforcement by the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896 (the "separate but equal" doctrine), yet a new Supreme Court decision was made in 1954 on the case of Brown v. Board of Education, which became one of the landmarks in the fight for Civil Rights. Until then, according to the case description, black children had been attending schools only for “colored” people, which were not close to their homes nor were they as well equipped as white schools were. When parents tried to enrol their children in white schools, the children were usually refused attendance. Because of this, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) generated multiple lawsuits against school segregation. Although some failed, Brown managed to succeed since it was able to show that the “separate but equal” doctrine was not being put into practice as white schools were way more equipped than black schools when it came to teachers, curricula, facilities, and transportation. The decision of the Supreme Court dictated the end of segregations in public schools. In 1957, nine black students were to be the first black students to enrol in a high school that thus then only had white students, however, they were received with much hate from both white students and bystanders. This episode became known as Little Rock Nine and it was only

after this that integration finally became mandatory through the Cooper v. Aaron decision (1958).

Just one year after *Brown v. Board of Education*, Rosa Parks took the conscious decision to sit on a Montgomery bus seat designed to white people and refused to move back, ending up arrested. This sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, during which black folks did not ride the buses for more than one year (which caused a serious economic crisis in the city transit system) until the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregation on public buses unconstitutional. Still, black people were being discriminated. In 1960, these acts of non-violent civil disobedience, promoted by people like Martin Luther King Jr., kept on happening. Four black university students in Greensboro, North Carolina sat down at a Woolworth store¹¹ demanding to be served since segregation was no longer legal. This encouraged more students to sit in, eventually leading to the end of Woolworth's segregation.

Some tend to remember the Civil Rights Movement as one single unit, however, this movement was divided into multiple movements. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are usually the most mentioned names, as well as organizations such as the NAACP, which had been established at the dawn of the 20th century, but in fact there were other figures and organizations that were as relevant and had a significant impact on the fight for black people's rights.

Reed argues that the big scale movements would have not been possible without the work of black women who worked locally. Ella Baker, for instance, was one of if not the main protagonists of these local movements: "It is unlikely that any figure in the movement logged more traveling miles around the nation in these years than Ella Baker, a woman key to the founding and functioning of both of the most important organizations of the movement, SCLC and SNCC". (Reed, 2005: 4). Baker organized the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) following the North Carolina sit-in movements made by university students. The SNCC was one of the most important organizations during the 60s as it was focused on training students on how to be socially active instead of following just one leader as it was happening within other organizations. This way they could reach more people and and make thme more socially aware. SNCC along with the help of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) fought for the inclusion of black students in universities and schools in general, however it was not until the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), triggered by Executive Order 10925 signed by President John F. Kennedy, that it became mandatory for

¹¹ Apparently, the owners had ordered to serve white people only.

employers to take affirmative action and to make sure there was no discrimination regarding race, gender, etc. This meant that some minorities would be hired based on race, gender, class, etc., since they would not be selected under normal circumstances.

In theory, affirmative action would improve diversity and it would give more opportunities to minorities, who, because of discrimination, would not be employed and consequently, they would still be facing poverty (African-Americans, for instance, are one of the racial groups that is known to be historically poor due to discrimination) (Wasson, 2004: 6). Nowadays, schools and employers are still required to fill in quotas, so these institutions can represent the country's multiculturalism, but it is not imperative as it was during the 60s. In fact, the Supreme Court started looking at it unfavourably since some would describe the employment of some minorities as "reverse discrimination" (basically, discrimination against people belonging to the dominant groups) (Cf. Wasson, 2004). Moreover, affirmative action is also seen as an insult by many people of color since the decision to accept a person of color into a job or a college/university position is a decision also made based on skin color. Giving preferential attention to people of color may be discouraging as their skills may be downplayed by others. Affirmative action can also lead to more discrimination within institutions instead of ending it, however, it seems that it is still necessary to keep quotas for black people as they are still experiencing more poverty than most whites. If black people do not get proper education, it is most likely they cannot occupy high places as workers in a capitalist economy, and consequently, their life conditions will never improve, resulting in them always being pushed to the margins.

The subalternization of black people at many levels also means that some institutions dominated by white people are not committed to be diverse and change the system. As stated by Fredrickson (2003: 21):

[...] there is little or no chance that the white majority would be willing to make the sacrifices required. Affirmative action policies in employment and education would be another way to begin to overcome the handicaps resulting from past discrimination, but the courts have held that "racial preferences" are not justified. The failure to use race-specific policies to rectify historically created racial inequity and inequalities could mean the indefinite perpetuation of these inequalities. Black degradation confirms the prejudices of whites who lack an adequate understanding of American history, and engenders alienation and bitterness among blacks, who may rightly feel that they are still not accorded the respect and advantages that substantive citizenship should entail.

The Civil Rights Act (1964), that made illegal any sort of discrimination based on race, gender, religion, etc, as well as segregation and any sort of pre-requirements in order to vote, was finally signed as a result of the resistance created by these revolutionary groups and also the U.S. need to be perceived as a free country in a context of Cold War (they could not be preaching for freedom and condemning Germany for the Holocaust while legally oppressing racial minorities) (Fredrickson, 2003: p. 8). African-Americans and other people of color were finally free, virtually at least. This meant that African-Americans were also full citizens. However, it did not mean that all problems regarding racism were instantaneously gone and this dissertation and the books I will later analyse are proof of it.

Although the Civil Rights Act had been passed there were some states that still did not abide by the new laws. For example, until 1967 interracial marriages were illegal in many states including the state of Virginia. That was until the time the case of Mildred and Richard Loving, a white man and a black woman, changed the marriage laws in at least 16 states. In 1958, this couple had gotten married and soon after they were arrested, ending up being exiled from Virginia due to the interracial marriage ban. After a lengthy process of being away from their home, being arrested again after visiting their relatives in Virginia, and multiple appeals, the couple's case was finally discussed at the Supreme Court (Vinās-Nelson, 2017). It was then concluded that banning their marriage went against the people's personal freedom, as stated below, especially after the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Regardless of all these advances in the fight for the rights of African-American people, there is still a long way to go. As Fredrickson (2003: 21) makes clear, referring to the 21st century:

By any objective standard, African-Americans continue to be greatly disadvantaged in comparison to their white compatriots. Blacks in the United States are now more residentially segregated from whites than they have ever been; they earn on the average only about three fifths as much as whites, are twice as likely to be unemployed, and have only about one-eighth as much property or net worth. More than half of all of the convicts in American prisons are African-Americans. They also fall far below general American standards in such indices of wellbeing as life expectancy, infant mortality, unwed motherhood and susceptibility to AIDS .

Black people's rights are written in the Constitution; however, they are still one of the minority groups that struggles the most in the U.S. for the application of their civil and political rights. Black ghettos are more common than ever and, as we will see below, they are highly patrolled and black people are constantly being arrested and killed.

- **The Relation of Black people to Justice and the Police**

In the light of this dissertation, it is relevant to mention how the relation with the U.S.A. Justice system and the law enforcers, such as the Police, are present in the lives of African-American people. As mentioned in the introduction and as we will see in the next chapter, one of the main concerns of the African-American community is the over-criminalization of black people. So, in order to understand this phenomenon, we need to look into systemic racism and racial profiling.

When we see the news of unarmed black people murdered by police officers, we usually see the names of the police officers individually. And if we believe their actions were moved by their own racism, we often think that the problem concerns individuals and not a system. Yet, we are constantly hearing about police's abuse of power towards black people. Why are there so many racist people in the enforcement? Did the police force coincidentally accept a large number of racist agents? Or is this about a more profound issue? Feagin (2006: 2) believes that racism is so deep into the U.S.A's major institutions that it has become the country's "material, social and ideological reality", hence, we should talk about a racism that is systemic instead of just individual racial prejudice and bigotry. Due to the dimensions of racism in the U.S.A, some discourses about black people and other racial minorities were made believable and became ingrained in the culture, including the idea that these minorities are more prone to committing crimes. This leads to racial profiling through which law enforcement officials target people mainly based on race, ethnic and religion beliefs.

bell hooks (1995, p. 195) also argues that although it is important to fight white supremacy on an individual level, in order to end racism we need to recognize that its roots lie in a system-based, structure-based problem, meaning that racism is a problem so deeply ingrained in the society that it needs to be tackled collectively. For that purpose, hooks defends that there should be an effort from everyone to end white supremacy. Note that it is not being argued that racist individuals are only pawns of a bigger system. People should still be held accountable, because we will only be able to dismantle institutional racism by also mobilizing individuals.

The origins of systemic racism started from the moment Europeans arrived on what we know now to be the American continent. They went from stripping Natives from their lands to mass murdering them. Because they felt entitled to explore and take possession of the territory, the colonizers abducted Africans in order to exploit their labor force by means of enslavement. The early settlers believed it was their destiny to populate those *desert* lands and create the freest country on the planet (see Winthrop, 1630) and this idea prevails to this day. However, what

really happened was that “European colonists and their descendants created a new society by means of active predation, exploitation, and oppression” (Feagin, 2006: 2), and this can be proven by the way they dealt with the African captives: “This system of white on black oppression was not an accident of history but was created intentionally by powerful white Americans. Whites labored hard to bring it forth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and have labored to perpetuate this system of oppression ever since.” (Feagin, 2006: 8)

Since white people were economically, academically, socially and politically in power, they had the advantage of creating laws, of dictating social roles, and of positioning themselves as the main subjects while othering everyone else who was not white. White people were the ones to make the distinction between *white* and *black* as an instrument of oppression (Feagin, 2006: 15): “‘White’ defined who the European Americans were, and who they were not. Whiteness was indeed a major and terrible invention, one that solidified white thinking into an extensive and racialized either/or framework and that came to symbolize for whites the ‘ownership of the earth’ and ‘civilization.’” (Feagin, 2006: 15).

This privilege allowed white people to reproduce and repeat the representation of black people as lazy, aggressive and evil to the extent that it became naturalized, even though we know it does not correspond to the reality. Yet, the fact that these representations came from a white power structure made it possible for this kind of racism to be systemic instead of only targeting some individuals. Thus, the presence of these ideas in the minds of people as part of a culture makes way for extensive and intensive racial profiling in the U.S.

According to the Constitution, equal protection is provided to all citizens regardless of race, however, it seems that racial profiling has been the reason for the overrepresentation of black people in American prisons and the overkilling of unarmed black people in the last few years.

[T]he Ontario Human Rights Commission’s Terms of Reference define racial profiling more broadly to include any action undertaken for reasons of safety, security or public protection that relies on stereotypes about race, colour, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or place of origin rather than on reasonable suspicion, to single out an individual for greater scrutiny or different treatment. (The Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003: 5)

Although this study was made by a Canadian institution, I believe this definition for racial profiling can be applied more generally. Looking at it, we can note that racial profiling goes against the 14th Amendment since it is based on one’s identity instead of one’s crimes. Not only does racial profiling reduce people to stereotypes but it also strips people from their freedom

and dignity and from their right to the presumption of innocence. According to Baldwin (2018: 433), racial profiling has made, in this case, the blackness of people a plausible justification for not only law enforcement agents but people in general to suspect and criminalize black people.

Racial profiling is considered to be a relatively recent phenomenon as we know it today in the 21st century (Silton, 2002: 55), however, we can trace it back to the 50s when two white men thought it was their right to police and punish Emmett Till. Even though some may defend that those men were only acting according to the Jim Crow laws, these laws were only a pretext to keep controlling and harming black people without any repercussions. One would like to think there would be some changes between then and now. Yet, even with laws that claim to protect black people, white supremacists are still able to escape unharmed out of these cases while black people are overly convicted.

As reported by The Sentencing Project about 35.4% of imprisoned people are black, making them the group with the biggest number of incarcerated people. The study also shows the following: "More than 60% of the people in prison today are people of color. Black men are nearly six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men and Hispanic men are 2.3 times as likely. For black men in their thirties, 1 in every 10 is in prison or jail on any given day." (The Sentencing Project, 2015: 5)

Due to racial profiling, black people are more likely to be stopped by the police than any other group in the United States. In addition, as of January 2019, black people are three times more likely to be killed by police officers than white people ("Mapping Police Violence"). These numbers are induced not only by the discourses proliferated by white supremacists, but also by the "War on Drugs" campaign. This campaign was launched by president Nixon's administration in the beginning of the 1970s and it was extended through the 1980s. It aimed to end America's drug problem. However, Silton (2002: 60-62) explains that this "War on Drugs" ended up being a "War on Blacks" and other racial minorities in the U.S. Despite African-Americans representing about 13% of the US's population and also only 13% of overall illegal drug consumers, "African Americans constitute 35% of drug arrests, 55% of drug convictions, and 74% of drug imprisonments". Silton also states that between 1976 and 1989 while whites' incarceration and drug arrest rates increased by 50% and 70% respectively, black people's rates increased by 350% and 450%. According to data presented by Welch (2007: 279),

National crime surveys indicate that most racial and ethnic groups consume illegal drugs

at approximately similar rates (Katz, 2000)¹². Specifically, Whites account for almost 75% of the nation's illegal drug users, and Blacks account for about 13%, which is consistent with their representations in the greater U.S. population. Blacks, however, account for about 75% of the nation's drug prisoners, which reveals the extreme disparity manifest in the national crackdown on the drug problem.

As we can observe, the gap between whites and blacks is too big for drugs to be solely a "black problem". Siltan proceeds by explaining that law enforcement agencies highlight some places as high crime areas. As Baldwin (2018: 442) points out, "high crime areas" became code names for urban areas such as ghettos for black or latinx people, therefore, they are heavily patrolled even if the crime rates are not high in some of those neighborhoods. Another contributor to this overcriminalization issue is the fact that powder cocaine and crack cocaine have different penalties, although, according to Welch's research (2007: 279) crack and powder cocaine are the same kind of drug just in different physical states. Generally, powder cocaine is consumed by white users, whereas crack cocaine is consumed by people of color.

Although it has been shown by Siltan (2002: 60-62) that the overrepresentation of black people in prisons and drug use does not correspond to the real number of black criminals and drug users. Black people remain the main targets of surveillance. That has also to do with the fact that the media is highly biased, although it should not be:

While implicit bias can account for the unwavering punitive approach by legislators to fight crime in communities of color, the power of the media's portrayal of the crime problem as a black behavior problem has also contributed to the increased pursuit to not only enforce the criminal laws against African Americans, but also to anticipate criminal behavior in black neighborhoods through surveillance. (Baldwin, 2018: 443)

The media keep playing the same negative images of African-American people over and over again, leading the public opinion into hosting said representations in their minds. Consequently, black people became over-criminalized due to the generalizations made about the areas they live in and the misrepresentations made about them. Not only are blacks harassed in their neighborhoods but they are also three times more likely to be searched during traffic stops than white people, according to a 2008 report (Eith & Durose, 2011: 10). Since police officers and other law enforcement agents are consciously or unconsciously biased, what happens is that they

¹² I cannot access the original article due to the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper being now blocked in the European Union.

end up harassing, arresting and/or killing innocent people in order to reach their goals, be it dismantling drug trafficking organizations, or deliberately harming black people due to cultural expectations or individual prejudices.

There are many signs of a gender-marked discrimination too. Although mostly socially invisible, Black women were and still are the most targeted group when it comes to violence, poverty, sexism, misogyny and when applied, homophobia. Traditional anti-racist discourses were generally focused on the protection of black men and feminist discourses were mostly centred on white women. The violence black women experience cannot be explained through those traditional discourses, as they are, at least, marginalized within two groups, race and class, and their oppression is intersectional. Crenshaw (1991: 1252) explains that women of color may experience racism differently than men of color and that the sexism white women are victims of may not amount to the experiences of black women (cf. hooks, 1982: p. 7). This means that when looking at black women we should consider that besides racism, they are also targets of misogyny (that may encompass battering and rape besides verbal aggression) by not only white men, but also white women and black men. Furthermore, most black women are from lower classes, therefore, they are usually financially dependent on their partners since most of the times they are discriminated by employers who are majorly white, and/or their partners control them to the extent they cannot be breadwinners. There is also the fact some black women are LGBTQ+ making them targets of queerfobia. This is why the protection of black women should be made through intersectional lenses that encompass their complete experience:

“Although these negative meanings certainly tend to be inscribed upon the bodies of young Black males, Black women are not immune to being stereotyped and profiled as criminal suspects, particularly as drug couriers or mules, addicts, and sex workers (...). This makes Black women vulnerable to a range of gender-specific abuses from official and vigilante law enforcement. Not uncommonly, profiling leads to strip searches, sexual harassment, and rape (Ritchie and Mogul 2007: 19-20).” (Harison, 2013: 2)

When we hear and read about racial profiling the focus is usually on the criminalization of black adult males (Lindsey, 2015: 235) and there is a tendency to overlook the criminalization of women and girls. We know that slavery allowed many slaveowners to sexually abuse black slave-women (Finkelman, 2012: 111; hooks, 1982, p. 15-49), which resulted in many other problems such as dehumanization of black women, colorism and an even deeper sexualization of the black female body. Racist discourses about black people have labelled them as aggressive and generally bad. Black women are also depicted as more sexual than white women. These

representations take away any innocence from black women and, therefore, people think it is legitimate to harm black women as they are already inherently bad. Black women who are victims of rape are not taken seriously since they do not fit society's standards of innocence and purity (cf. Crenshaw, 1991). This is why when it comes to police violence, some law officials still carry in their minds that they are entitled to black women's bodies and many times, black women end up being harassed.

Adults are usually the main focus of these news, but as of lately, we have been hearing about too many teenagers being killed at the hands of police officers, like the characters of the novels I will later analyse. I have mentioned Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, but they are only a small representation of the high number of victims. A series of studies were made about the image that people have of children and teenagers when it comes to criminality and it was noticed that children from all races are seen equally until the age of ten but from then on black children are perceived as less innocent than others (Goff et al., 2014: 529). In the end, the researchers came to the conclusion that: "a novel implication of the dehumanizing representations of Blacks (...) is that Black boys can be misperceived as older than they actually are and prematurely perceived as responsible for their actions during a developmental period where their peers receive the beneficial assumption of childlike innocence." (Goff et al., 2014: 540)

This explains (but does not justify) the deaths of 14-year-old Emmett Till, 12-year-old Tamir Rice¹³ and many other black youngsters in more recent times. In Goff et al's study, it is also said that "any context that provokes consideration of a child as an adult should be particularly susceptible to the effects of dehumanization" (2014: 528). Meanwhile, white children's age and culpability is usually decreased in comparison to black children's (Goff et al., 2014: 540). This creates a heavier opposition between black and white, in which black minors do not benefit from the protection they should be provided with. In their home environments black children and teenagers are given "the talk", the usual talk about sexual education. Yet, black minors in the U.S. get a second "talk" which consists of them being taught how to act around white police officers¹⁴ and white adults in general in order not to be harmed by them. Instead of controlling potential racist and violent police officers, black children and teenagers are the ones who have to be careful not to be killed. Kids should not have to worry about being murdered because other adults do not perceive them as beings in need of protection. However, it is imperative that

¹³ There is a wide time gap between Emmett Till's murder and Tamir Rice's murder, however, they become close to one another due to the fact that they were both young kids victims of white supremacy.

¹⁴ This means that black children learn how to behave in a way police officers do not find a reason to act violently towards them. This is basically a way adults teach young black children how to be passive towards potential dangerous white police officers for security measures.

black people, but especially children and teenagers stop dying at the hands of white supremacists. In order to do that, it is imperative that we can tackle systemic racism.

- **White People's Accountability**

Despite black people still being targets of systemic racism in the US, many white people dismiss this issue since they claim that “it’s not their problem”, yet, they forget that they are a crucial part to the fight against white supremacy. Therefore, in this section I will try to explain how white people tend to position themselves as regards white supremacy and how they can overturn it.

When it comes to online protesting in the #BlackLivesMatter era, #AllLivesMatter is one of the most used hashtags, usually by white individuals. Whenever #BlackLivesMatter is used in a social media context, some individuals will “counteract” with #AllLivesMatter, claiming that defending only the lives of black people is discriminatory, some even dare to say that it is racist, but we will get there in a moment. Presumably, all lives should matter. Life, supposedly, is a universally recognized right that should be inherent to everyone, however, this is not the reality of black folks in the US as we saw in the previous two sections. The #BlackLivesMatter movements do not seem to want to diminish the lives of other racial groups or the lives of white people. But historically white people have always been on the side of privilege. As the main perpetrators of oppression against other racial minorities in the US, white people won't ever be racially oppressed. Although there are racial and religious problems in the US regarding Native, Asian, Latinx, Jewish and other communities, the #BlackLivesMatter movements have been triggered by the constant deaths of unarmed black people, especially young people. Regardless, some white people either tend to ignore this issue and claim that black people are either “too sensitive” or they are making up stories since in their (the whites’) perspective, equality has been achieved, therefore, racism does no longer exist¹⁵ and consequently, black people and other people of color are oppressed by choice since they prefer to remain dependent on government assistance in their view; another position is that they tend to place themselves at the same level as black people when it comes to oppression. This usually happens when people protest against the police officers involved in the killing of unarmed black people. In the perspective of the people who stand by the #AllLivesMatter hashtag, the police officers’ lives were also in danger, therefore, using #BlackLivesMatter or protesting against them is a way of oppressing the

¹⁵ They are, in fact, promoting “color blindness”, which, when it comes to matters of race, means that one does not acknowledge one’s physical difference (usually skin color). By not recognizing their obvious difference, they are also dismissing one’s history of struggle and the still present problems one has to confront due to said physical difference.

officers. Unconsciously, or not, they are failing to see their own privileged position, both as white individuals or people of a lighter complexion¹⁶ than black people, and also as members of the country's law enforcement. Thus, by using #AllLivesMatter, people¹⁷ are ignoring their own positions and the fact that "right now, #BlackLives are the ones in danger" (Baldwin, 2018: 7).

This brings us to white privilege. According to Kendall "White privilege is an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions" (2002: 1). Kendall explains that these benefits are not earned, instead, they are assigned to white people because of their race, regardless of whether or not they are good people. In comparison to black people, white people are most likely to have access to resources, like bank loans for houses or cars, medical assistance, employment, quality education, and the most important aspect for this dissertation, protection.

Essentially, due to centuries of putting the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant people, preferentially male, at the centre of the US's society, white people are able to get away with nearly anything, while the more citizens (if considered to be one) deviate from the "norm", the more scrutinized and doubted they will be. White people are easily listened to and given credit, whereas, black people are often ignored, and they need to work *at least* twice harder than white people to prove themselves. White people are easily represented on the media as the good people, while black people constantly appear as the evil ones. When it comes to the beauty industry, it is most likely that the people represented are white and consequently the products will be catered to them, leaving black people and other people of color underrepresented. As aforementioned, black people make up the highest numbers in the US's prisons along with Latinx, and they are most likely to be racially profiled than white people, which results in more deaths in the black communities. White people do not have to think about the clothes and the hairstyles they wear on the street because no police officer will stop them or kill them for it. Even if a white person is economically less privileged than a black person, the white person does not have to worry about walking freely. White people do not need to think about the stereotypes made about them because they are not essentialized as often as black people are. White people can get away with being racist and no one will hold them accountable, because they are used to not being

¹⁶ George Zimmerman, the police officer who killed Trayvon Martin, is of Peruvian descent, but I am not going to delve into the complexity of colorism and racial hierarchies in this dissertation.

¹⁷ White people were not the only ones using this hashtag. People from other racial groups, for example, latinx, who were still greatly prejudiced or uneducated about racism and white supremacy did it too.

reprimanded. White people are used to being free and some of them do not recognize that.

Peggy McIntosh (1989: 3-5) in her essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”, makes a list of conditions that she claims to have taken for granted. For white people, most of those conditions seem to be a normal part of their lives. However, when people of color point out that they do not benefit from those conditions, white people tend to be hostile and find some instance where they have been the slightest “discriminated” to try and prove that they too are as oppressed as people of color. For instance, whenever a black person tells white people not to use the *n-word* when singing rap songs and in general due to its history, the latter feel as if their freedom of expression is being restrained, when in fact they are offending black people by not respecting their position. There are cases when black people will blatantly show their prejudice against white people, however, whites claim they are being victims of “reverse- racism”. Reverse-racism does not exist. bell hooks (1995: p. 154) argues that when white people are the targets of prejudice, that is all there is. Whether they agree with it or not, racism is based on institutionalized white supremacy which white people created to benefit from .

White people keep on focusing the attention on themselves, by using their own privileged “experiences as the referent for everyone” (Kendall, 2002: 8). Blinded by their privilege, they dismiss the experiences of people of color, by saying that they are exaggerating when they mention a situation where they felt they were being targets of racism: “I’m not followed around in the store by a guard. What makes you think you are?” (Kendall, 2002: 8). There are also times when white people make jokes about people of color and when the latter point out that those jokes should not be repeated since they are hurtful and might perpetuate harmful stereotypes, more often than not, whites’ reactions are something along the lines of: “It’s just a joke, lighten up!”, “Why do you always have to make everything about race?”, “Are you calling me a racist?”. Instead of looking back to pinpoint where the joke stopped being a joke they keep on dismissing people’s feelings.

The “jokes” evolve to even more serious comments about people of color. Zach Boros (2017) gives the example of the Charlottesville rally lead by racist Neo-Nazi people about which people made a series of comments, trying to find the good side of those protestants. This story is not a new one. Whenever there are news of a white police officer killing an unarmed black person or news of a white person mass shooting at a school, the impulse is to find the good side of those white individuals. Usually, there is a family member on television speaking about how great a person the assailant was, or a TV commentator speaking about the potential psychological problems the assailants might have had, in order to excuse their actions.

As racism and all the problems attached to it do not affect white people, many of them feel like that it is not in their interest to fight white supremacy. Kendall says that “Far too many of us who are white erroneously believe that we do not have to take the issues of racism seriously” (2002: 4). If white people consider themselves as neutral before white supremacy, they are indirectly perpetuating more violence towards people of color. Some may think that if they fight against white supremacy, they might get stripped from some of their privileges. For example, when it comes to affirmative action, they feel like their places are being *stolen* by people of color, when in reality, quotas allow minorities to earn places they are qualified for without being surpassed by someone solely by their white skin:

If you do not condemn something, or are passive in its happening, or in its presence, you are inherently condoning that action. As white people, we have the opportunity to call out racist statements or actions by other white people. If we stand in the face of racists and continue to do nothing, we are perpetuating that ideology. No matter if they are neo-Nazis or classmates less overt with their prejudices, letting a fellow white person know what they are doing is wrong and unacceptable is holding a fellow citizen accountable for the well-being and security of minorities all over America. Being a white person and remaining silent is inexcusable; remaining silent leads to violence. (Boros, 2017)

White people should look at the whole, as hooks (1984: viii) defends:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body (...) Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. By coming from the center, where history put them, to the margins, white people will be able to deconstruct their own whiteness and understand how they can use their own privilege to help minorities. Looking at the whole picture would allow people to critically understand their own positions. At the same time white people are coming to the margins, they should listen to the ones who have always been fighting at the margins instead of imposing their own experiences. In the light of this dissertation, white people have the moral obligation of holding themselves accountable first for their privilege, then for their racism. This does not mean that white people should replace people of color in their fights; instead, they could aid them and help their voices to be heard. Just like Peggy McIntosh believes, it is a matter of moral responsibility whether people want

to use their power to improve the U.S.A society or not:

Although systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and, I imagine, for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base. (1989: 7)

The thing to note here, also, is that people of color are not required to educate white people about their struggles. Melanie S. Morrison (2013) quotes one of her black colleagues who says that racism is a problem created by white people, therefore, they should find the solution to end it. Meanwhile, black people are still telling their history and fighting racism through multiple media besides the traditional ones. They have been releasing politically charged music, visual art and literature. It is to the literary medium as a political tool that I'll direct my attention in the next sections of this dissertation

II – AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

- **Young Adult Fiction**

According to the National Council of Teachers of English, Young Adult Fiction or Young Adult Literature¹⁸ can be defined as: "literature wherein the protagonist is either a teenager or one who approaches problems from a teenage perspective [...]"¹⁹ Typically, they describe initiation into the adult world, or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world. Though generally written for a teenager reader, such novels— like all fine literature – address the entire spectrum of life." (Mitra, 2018: 5). The definition of young adult and teenager varies from study to study, from culture to culture and its concepts having been changing throughout time.

The concept of adolescence is a fairly recent one. In the West, during medieval times people, there was no transitional phase from childhood to adulthood. After ten years of age, on average, it was required for children, especially girls, to behave like adults. This was more common amongst lower class families as children were required to work in order to help with the family's expenses. As societies evolved and Western industrialization settled, children (as we see them today) were not needed in factories as much and policies were made to protect them, since people finally realized they were still developing physically and cognitively (Abowitz & Rees). The concept of teenager in the U.S. became more present in the 1920s/30s as there was a group of people undergoing physical and cognition development who stayed more time at school, due to compulsory education and anti-child labour policies. While a few years ago 15-year-olds were considered to be ready for marriage and work, nowadays 15-year-olds are considered to be children who should be in school, in some places they are not even suitable for work or parenthood.²⁰ This age group was mostly part of an emerging middle class that had more money to spend on culture goods such as music, cinema, theatre. Because of this, many products were being manufactured specifically for teenagers. Only then in the 20s/30s were teenagers perceived as a group that goes through major physical and psychological changes and a period of identity discovery. Moreover, only recently have children and teenagers become the targets of marketing, therefore it makes sense for YAF to be so recent.

While Reena Mitra speaks of YAF as literature made specifically for teenagers, others expand the spectrum by including readers in their early twenties, as they are, in fact, young adults. Alice

¹⁸ Hereafter referred as YAF or YAL.

¹⁹ These brackets are the author's.

²⁰Nowadays, in some countries, due to political and financial factors (mostly), children are still forced to work by their parents or elders. Moreover, teen parenthood and child labour might happen simultaneously in those countries.

Trupe, in her *Thematic Guide to Young Adult Literature*, selects a list of themes that most fit the interests of an age range going from twelve to seventeen years old. Yet, she acknowledges that the ability to read YAF varies from reader to reader. While some 10-year-olds have the ability to read more complex works due to their learning speed, others go at a slower pace and might not be able to read such complex works. This means that the concept of literature suitable for teenagers or young adults may shift. Gail Zdilla (2014: 193) argues that the age range should be extended as there are older people than seventeen/eighteen years old reading YAL and the author ascribes this phenomenon to the success of literary works such as the *Harry Potter* saga by J.K. Rowling. Nowadays, YAF is a very popular form of literature. After questioning a group of young readers, Zdilla came to the conclusion that some like YAF because most works are quick to read (and because of that they can fit reading into their busy schedules as students); some like the verisimilitude YAF gives them as they can relate to the characters and learn from their journeys; others like the fact that YAF's writing style does not differ much from their oral speech.

The origins of YAF in the USA can be traced back to the 1950s when *Catcher In The Rye* by J.D. Salinger was published (Sunita, p. iii). This novel was innovative in the sense that the narrator was the main character, Holden Caulfield. The entirety of the narration is made of Holden's own thoughts and dialogue between him and other characters he encounters –having a first-person narrator in which the author did not intervene in the narration to explain the story was not common. The novel might have been and still is notorious due to the verisimilitude I mentioned above. Holden is a high school student (although expelled) and like many other teenagers he harbors a lot of unfavourable opinions about the world surrounding him, especially adults, since he finds them mistrusting, hence his persistence on calling people around him “phony”. Even now, teenagers claim to be misunderstood and wronged by adults. Moreover, Salinger's work was released right after the end of World War II, so, perhaps, it has some remainders from the angst the war brought, and people could relate to it since it was still so present. In a way, *Catcher In The Rye* is a book about rebellion. The novel was quite controversial as it presented alcohol abuse and premarital sex amongst teenagers, which, along with *rock 'n' roll*, were seen as promiscuous and immoral according to the typical white Christian middle class family's standards. Furthermore, the book was banned since some thought it was influenced by communism which was rejected by most Americans due to the results of World War II and the Cold War that would be extended until the 1980s.

It was only in the following decades, the 60s and the 70s, that publishers started recognizing the commercial potential of YAF. Nonetheless, “critical recognition and scholarly interest has

lagged a bit behind the inventiveness of authors in the field.” (Trupe, 2006: vii). Some credit has been given to YAF through the years but there is still little criticism of YAF besides the usual book reviews (Trupe, 2006: vii; Sunita, 2018: viii-v). Even though YAF is sometimes written through different forms — poetry, short stories, novels — the novel has been the most used by YAF writers. Despite the earlier themes being more focused on real life, writers have been venturing through other options such as fantasy and science-fiction. And, as times goes by, the themes within YAF works are becoming more topical and critical – mentions of rape, teen pregnancies and in the light of the novels analysed in my later sections, racism, murder and death – and they are getting more emotionally developed characters (Zdilla, 2014: 192; Yampbell, 2005: 350- 351). My interpretation on these developments is not that young readers now are suddenly developing faster than the generations before, but more information is accessible to a bigger number of young people²¹ due to technological advancements and globalization. In addition, the world is much more open to questions of sexuality, identity gender and mental health, which might have been taboo topics before. Perhaps this makes it easier for young people to develop their critical thinking in an autonomous way, without resorting to adults as often, since information is one click away. As they are becoming more socially conscious, teenagers and young adults, mostly, are also thinking more and more about the issues that affect them (such as police brutality against black people, xenophobic measures against Latinx, global warming and many others), and they are actively fighting for their rights through simple social network interactions or demonstrations.

Young Adult Fiction works’ sales have been increasing throughout the years, especially because of the opening of the digital era. Due to the easy access many teenagers have to computers, tablets, phones and other digital reading devices, publishers started investing in e-books that are less expensive than printing books and this way they can reach a bigger number of potential readers. In addition, some YAF books have been adapted into films which may also function as promotion for the books. If the films are successful, viewers usually want to read the books that originated them, increasing sales. However, popularity not always equals quality. Although YAF is thriving, there is not much critical attention directed at it. As we will see below, some claim that is it because this form of literature is recent, others think the aesthetic quality of the texts is not good enough and others claim that YAF may corrupt young people.

So, is YAF part of the literary canon? As of today, the selection of YAL works available on online stores such as the *Book Depository* or *Amazon* goes from fantasy books such as the *Harry*

²¹ Not everyone has access to the internet, a smartphone or a computer, so this mainly applies to middle class children and above.

Potter saga by J.K. Rowling, the *Percy Jackson* saga by Rick Riordan or contemporary fiction books such as *The Fault In Our Stars* by John Green or one of the books analysed here, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, to classics such as *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee and *The Catcher in The Rye* by J.D. Salinger.²² The selection is more extensive, yet, maybe apart from the books I referred to as classics and despite the phenomenon that was the *Harry Potter* saga (with the help of its adaptation to a film saga), there is still some prejudice against this genre of literature. Chris Crowe (2001: 146) presents two main reasons as to why YAF may be rejected by some: the first is that it isn't the classics. Regarding the first reason, Crowe argues that some books he considers having weak writing and low-quality covers are usually the books the media and the general public are the most familiar with, therefore, the general opinion on YAF is quite negative. Crowe's article was released eighteen years ago so there may be slight differences in how YAF is now perceived. In addition to the quality issue, Crowe (2001: 147) also adds that as YAF is relatively new, and although there are some works that might be considered as classics, YAF books have not been around time enough for them "to stand the test of time the way *Beowulf*, Shakespearean plays, *Pride and Prejudice*, *War and Peace*, and other works have." (2001: 147). If we accept this reason, we could conclude that only in the future will we see if more YAF works prevail in the collective memory of book readers.

A literary work has value depending on many factors. One of them is clearly the quality of the writing. Works that usually stand out present new ways of using English. Some writers can play with language better than others and that can affect their writing. For instance, Shakespeare even used words that had not been recorded into the English language prior to his works such as "assassination" or "eventful" (Cf. David Crystal, *The English Language*²³) making his stories more intriguing and perhaps more difficult to interpret, leaving an impression on the readers. Books that are not clear on their messages or interpretation are usually preferred by the critics. Not that their stories might be confusing, but it could be that the author's writing allows the reader to come up with more than one interpretation. Instead of books that explicitly narrate the story, some people find books more interesting if they hint at the actions, making the readers think about them even if they stopped reading the book. A book could also become more interesting than others if the written language in the book looks fluid and natural, as opposed to writers who force figures of speech into their texts making it sound artificial. Some say they like books that sound melodic when read aloud.

Another of factor is the cultural context in which the works are inserted, since literature is not

²² The latter two works would be the YAF works that are represented in the literary canon.

²³ Crystal, David. *The English Language*. London: Penguin Books, 2002.

produced in a social vacuum (Kolbas, 2001: 140). As we saw above, *The Catcher In The Rye* by Salinger was relevant to a class of teenagers dissatisfied with the environment around them, and the symbols of rebellion in it still resonate within young people's minds. The war had ended recently, so, despite the growth of the country's economy, Americans were still dealing with fears of communism and the ongoing Korean War. White teenagers felt left out and ignored by adults. Moreover, as rock 'n' roll and music that teenagers could relate to started being released, they became the target of bans since rock 'n' roll was seen as promiscuous and it could lead teenagers to a criminal life (according to conservative adults). Teenagers were then dissatisfied due to these generational conflicts.

The books I chose to analyse as examples are political as they expose police brutality and criticize it, so my political stance is that I am against police brutality. Some are of the opinion that by including certain books in the canon, critics are reinforcing their political interests instead of looking at books solely for their art. Kolbas (2001: 140) argues that this idea is not grounded enough to be supported claiming that it is problematic to think of all literary works as direct representations of one's political or social interests. Nonetheless, I am of the opinion that all literary works are political in some way.

About the reason above mentioned — "books are too dark for teenagers and they would corrupt the minds of children" (Crowe, 2001:148) — Crowe argues that "These bleak generalizations about novels for teenagers have fanned the critical fires of adults who are already worried that YA books corrupt the young. Unfortunately, this negative press has also caused concern among some people who previously had no problems with YA literature." (Crowe, 2001: 148). Along the same line Janet Alsup observes that some YAF books such as the *Gossip Girl* series by Cecily von Ziegesar should not be taught in the classroom as they tend to overmimic teen discourses and life situations to an extent that girls might think that their reality should be based on a confrontational misogynistic basis (2014: 11-12). These books portray the lives of upper-class teenagers and some say they fall into the "teen chick lit" category which is defined as "rife with "girlfighting" — backbiting, name-calling, and stereotypically female aggressive behavior that some say is fed by media representations of girls that urge them to strive for perfection, often through battling their female peers." (2014: 11). On the other hand, Alsup argues that "YAL seems optimally positioned to be such a tool for young readers, since it provides characters and settings with which teens can readily identify and plotlines they can easily mine for clues about how to live." (2014: 9).

By generalizing YAL as bleak works, critics make potential readers move away from this genre

and miss other published YAL works that are far from corruptive or “bad”. Crowe (2001: 149) also advocates that teenagers are mature enough to know what they want to read and what messages to take from YAL, which should not exempt parents and other responsible adults from knowing which books they should find to their kids in order for YAF to be useful in their lives. Crowe presents a situation in which a columnist, Kathleen Parker, expressed her fear of classics being replaced by more contemporary “fun books” in library shelves, claiming these “fun books” would lower the bar of quality since they were more entertaining than classics, as she seems to claim. However, through these claims Crowe (2001: 147) argues that Parker seems to support the traditional views that classics are fastidious and only fastidious and challenging activities will be enriching for people, whereas reading something entertaining will not be worthwhile. Although valid points have been made about YAL not being as sophisticated as other works in the literary canon, there are some opinions that can be problematic for both literary genres. There is the idea that YAL is “too entertaining” to be considered serious. This idea may give the impression that YAF books are just defined by their entertaining nature while the books that deserve to belong to the canon have to be serious and hard to read (Crowe, 2001: 147). Horace said literature can be both ‘*prodesse et delectare*’, in other words, literature can be both useful and delightful.

This article was released in 2001 and since then YAF authors have pursued other kinds of themes and they have incorporated new and more complex stories in their stories. Even though YAF has been getting more acceptance as a genre worth reading as a skills developer amongst teenagers and young adults, “[t]here continues to be a great need for educational and literary scholars to study the genre from a critical, research-oriented perspective” (Alsup, 2014: 1). Even now, people still diminish YAL and argue that it is of easy reading, non-complex, and since they assume YAL is directed exclusively at teenagers and young adults, and because the majority of its protagonists are also young, they consider YAL to be immature and “too juvenile” (Mitra, 2018: 5).

During a YAL course lectured by B. Joyce Stallworth, she noticed that some of her students who were already English teachers or librarians harboured some prejudice against YAL just like the people already described above:

Most of the participants in my young adult literature course each semester are in-service English teachers and librarians. There are always some among the group who are initially very skeptical about using young adult literature in the high school English classroom. Some question its usefulness and literary merit; others equate it with less

serious juvenile series books of old; and many upper high school teachers want an explanation of how such literature could possibly be used to address the objectives in our state's 11th or 12th grade course of study. For example, Stella, who has a degree in English literature, stated early in one recent semester, "These books may be o.k. for recreational reading, but I don't see much educational value." (Stallworth, *ALAN v26n1-The Young Adult Literature Course: Facilitating the Integration of YAL into The High school English Classroom*)

The overall idea is that YAF is not relevant enough to develop critical nor aesthetic skills or appreciation for the art brought by the canonical works. Moreover, it is said that YAF is not appropriate for educational purposes and besides being recreational, a YAF book might bring, since the themes are generally suited to attract young readers through topics they may enjoy reading about. But literature should not be a burden, especially in a classroom context since, generally, children tend to cancel out non-engaging activities. If a book is entertaining at the same time that it teaches something to young readers, then that book has reached perfect balance. Looking at literature solely for its educational features takes its interesting features away, turning it tedious. The works that make up the canon usually cater to the intellectual needs of an adult; therefore, they are not fitting to answer the needs of young people. It is during the adolescence and the beginning of adulthood that people question their identities the most, and generally school fails to keep up with the student's identity changes. Studying literature at school could aid young people in those changes, however, the chosen works are the canonical works teenagers do not easily relate to (Bushman, 1997: 1-2). If we look at *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the book is a great for high school students to understand the U.S.A society in the 1920s which was marked by a culture of excess, the rise of Jazz music and the celebration of the American Dream. However, as novel that is mainly about upper class and wealthy adults, it is difficult for it to aid high school students in dealing with their adolescence issues.

YAF can actually approach heavier themes that concern teenagers. Fortunately, YAL in the US has been growing enough for writers to comprise "dark and intimidating issues that teens confront" and other issues they should deal with even if they have to leave their comfort zones and understand there are other realities happening beyond their privileged worlds. Those realities include identity problems, sexual abuse, alcohol and drugs consumption, suicide, etc. For example, the novels I will be analysing later, *The Hate U Give*, *Dear Martin* and *Tyler Johnson Was Here*, are easy reading and clear to understand, however, their themes are complex

— racial identity, racism, violence, crimes and death — turning them into novels that respond to topical issues and sadly portray the current lives of many young black people, who may be their main addressees. These books can help readers in dealing with their personal lives and they may even raise the awareness of others who are unaware of issues such as racial profiling and police brutality against black youth. In my opinion these books may act as may help young people through a pedagogical approach and can thus be relevant even in the context of a classroom to involve students in a discussion of the tension of racial relations in contemporary society and its intersectionality with other issues such as class, gender, and age. Kroger, quoted by Alsup (2014: 3) argues that self-definition comes during adolescence and that is why she argues that since it is during this phase that adolescents create their identities narratives, then reading can aid teenagers in using books as instruments that help them make sense of themselves and the environments surrounding them:

Perhaps young adult literature, with its settings, events, and characters which attempt to mirror the “real” lives of students, might encourage disenfranchised teen readers to enter narrative worlds when much anachronistic, classical literature leaves them feeling disconnected from school reading. As I’ve argued earlier in this introduction, reading young adult literature can precipitate important identity work on the part of teen readers; working through the complex cognitive-emotional process of character identification, for example, can help young readers understand their own experiences more clearly and critically. What happens during this transaction between a reader and a text might also assist teens in thinking about how their individual experiences fit into a larger socio-cultural context, often rife with racism, sexism, and homophobia. (Alsup, 2014: 13)

As they are still coming to terms with their identities, young readers may find in YAL some kind of help to understand themselves and the environments surrounding them. For instance, the books that are the object of analysis here include characters who represent minorities that are still fighting for representation and visibility. Oftentimes, children of minority groups (race, class, gender, sexuality, non-binary genders, etc.) do not have any support from educators, parents or other adults in order to make sense of their own situations and to understand why they are often at the margins in comparison to the children of dominant groups. Additionally, books taught in classes are either not fit to explore the readers’ identities who cannot find themselves represented in them. In the case of readers from minorities, reading and analysing stories in which the characters are in the same conditions as them may help them find new ways of thinking about themselves, a larger comprehension of the social structures, or new tools to fight for their rights. As Alsup explains above, those books may help young readers understand

the context that encapsulates them and their own experiences.

In a technological age as our current one, young people have video games, television, and the internet constantly at their fingertips. Electronic stimuli makes reading a book not always appealing — especially outside of school. The true to life quality and verisimilitude that YAL presents may attract new readers (Mitra, pp. 10-11) and if they start their literary learning with good YAL works, they may be tempted to delve into other kinds of more complex literature. Reena Mitra (2018: 8) mentions an article, “Against YA: Adults Should Be Embarrassed to Read Children’s Books” (2014) in which Ruth Graham diminishes adults who read YAF books since they are “written for children”. While the author of the article was trying to make adult readers of YAF seem “less sophisticated” consumers, Mitra argues that “[t]his attempt at empathizing with the adolescent intelligence can rewardingly equip one better to 'confront life in one's quotidian interactions with people around”, meaning that reading YAL can give adults a better understanding of the minds of adolescents. For instance, in her YAF book *Ghost Boys*, Jewell Parker Rhodes includes two sections directed to the readers, both: “Ghost Boys Discussion Questions” and “Further Resources For Parents and Educators” (2018: 209-214). The author suggests questions about the novel that not only require readers to have interpretational skills but also knowledge of the concept of “racial bias” or the history of Emmett Till; and she also provides parents and educators with websites about the *Black Lives Matter* movement and other important websites that raise awareness about ongoing police brutality against black people.

People who usually reject YAF/YAL claim that these books are “too simple” and “too easy to read”. One of the reasonings that might be behind the stories’ features is that teenagers’ brains are still under development:

According to Miall, when the prefrontal cortex is undeveloped (as in teens) or damaged, an individual has a more difficult time processing rapidly changing conditions or stimuli and responding to them appropriately. When reading a novel, processing various subplots, character changes, and developing themes might be more difficult for a teenage reader— at least without the guidance of a more skilled, mature reader, such as a teacher or parent. (Alsup, 2014: 3-4; cf . Miall, 1995)

If we follow this train of thought, then, it makes sense that YAF books are usually more up to date with the young readers’ age, they are also, sometimes, more realistic and they include less abstract language in comparison to books that might be considered adult fiction or classics. This

seems to capture teenagers' attention and it may also facilitate their interpretations:

Also, in fiction, this genre of literature underscores plot and avoids the abstract so that the development of the novel is within the comprehension of the young adult who has still to cultivate the beauty of the conceptual. (...) YA literature/fiction addresses the needs of student readers and thus manages to rivet their attention to whatever of advantage is stated in a language fully comprehensible to the fledgelings and at a cognitive level that corresponds to theirs. (Mitra, 2018: 11)

Diving into books that are catered for adults or people who have the habit of reading might be difficult for young readers who do not have reading habits or have not yet developed the cognitive skills to interpret "the beauty of conceptual" as Reena Mitra calls it. YAF can thus be a great starting point to create habits of reading.

- **The African-American Literary Canon**

Regardless of the existence of an American literary tradition, we wonder if this tradition accurately represents the reality of the US. The "main literary canon" often underrepresents minorities, hence the necessity to talk about their traditions individually. But before I analyse how the African-American tradition was constructed, I will briefly go over the early formation of the American literary canon.

As an ex-British colony, one of the main goals of the US, as a newly formed nation, was to detach itself from as much British influences as possible. But if the Declaration of Independence asserted the political independence, the cultural independence needed a much longer process to be achieved. In the 19th century many, such as Emerson in "The American Scholar" (1837), tried to build a new and exclusive American culture with its own tradition completely independent from the UK. Oliver Wendell Holmes claimed Emerson's work as America's Intellectual Declaration of Independence. Yet, one thing Americans could not get stripped off was a common language (Parker, 1991: 23). There were doubts about the authenticity of American literature: could Americans form their own new art or were they only following what the British had left. According to Taine's concept of *milieu*, although the English language was a heritage from America's former colonizer, the environment in the US molded a completely different experience. Therefore, culturally, the USA and Great Britain were essentially different and their literary traditions would also necessarily be distinct (although the artistic movements could be similar, which is the case of Romanticism in Europe and its American version, Transcendentalism).

It is important to mention that the U.S.A power structure began as mainly, if not completely, white and male, pushing minorities to the margin. Thus, the issue was that the “true” American literary canon was equally based on the remnants of the Anglo-Saxon standards, emphasising art made by white males and leaving out most literature written by women and ethnic minorities. Bubíková (2004: 26) explains that critics such as Van Wyck Brooks (1918, 1936) reformulated the literary canon and put Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman and Twain as the representatives of the national canon. Looking at the majority of the works by these authors, we can see that the trend was nationalist, adding to the country’s individualism, exceptionalism and racism as literature was an expression and manifestation of that “identity”. Later, in 1941, F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* was such an influential work that it established the core of the American literary canon for several decades, but the authors he elected were again Anglo- Saxon and male. According to Bubíková (2004: 27), only in 1920 was there the first attempt to include Native American poetry in the national canon. As to African-American literature, although we have slave narratives since the 18th century, although most were written in the 19th century, only in the 1970s were they included in the national canon, although some critics argued in favor of their incorporation in the American autobiographical tradition instead of regarding them as the root of an African-American tradition. These narratives were memoirs mostly written by fugitive slaves or ex-slaves (if they managed to become free) who wanted to document their lives so they could prove the terrors of slavery, but mostly, this genre started as a way of proving African-Americans’ humanity, as we will see below.

The Civil Right movements in the 1960s were not only beneficial to black people. The emergence of these movements and the anti-war movements gave way to the generation of other movements within other minorities:

Especially in the western United States, other peoples of color – Asian Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans – sought equality through their own nationalist endeavors and helped to forge the rising debates about multiculturalism. In addition, the contemporary women’s movement, ignited a decade before (...) gained center stage in the politics of the United States, especially in relation to reproductive rights and sexual violence (Gates & McKay, p. 2012)

Consequently, the literary canon that had remained predominantly white and male until the second half of the 20th century, started to open up. The national literary canon was now acknowledging the production by women and the traditions of minorities such as African-Americans. In the canon there were now slave narratives like Frederick Douglass' and Harriet

Jacobs. The thriving post-World War II literature was accompanied by the attribution of national and international prizes such as the Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize assigned to the late Toni Morrison, and saw the strengthening of African-American literature's theory and aesthetics through the recognition gained by African-American critics such as Houston Baker, Jr., Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Robert Stepto or Barbara Christian. The release of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.' and Nellie McKay's *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* in 1996, covering more than two centuries of African-American writing, was a landmark work to establish an African-American canon. The Black Arts Movement, motivated by the Black Power Movement during the 60s was successful in solidifying African-American culture "as a legitimate culture with its own ideas, forms, and styles rather than a pathology or a derivation of European American culture" (Bubíková, 2004: 27).

Although the canon had opened up to black artists, some writers, especially women and queer writers, were of the opinion that the "blackness" supported by the Black Arts Movement was being defended as a nationalist monolithic whole, mainly male, pushing aside women, queer people, immigrants, Caribbean people and other black people that did not fit the main discourse of the movement (Gates & McKay, 1996: 2011).

As relates readership, according to Gates & McKay (1996: xxxiii), by 1996 the number of black readers was a big one and it was estimated that African-American bought 160 million books a year. In addition, black literature became part of the courses offered by multiple university and college departments of Black Studies. Although this "opening up of the canon" was a great step for the proliferation and inclusion of the African-American tradition, African-Americans were still underrepresented in literature, and some even suggest that they were misrepresented:

[The] African-American literary tradition has one of the most peculiar starts in the realm of literatures. Its peculiarity stands in the fact that this tradition began because black slaves testified against slavery and proved their intellectual value through the mastering of the English language and the ideas resulting from the European and American Enlightenments, reason and civil liberty, that they were deprived from. (...) African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belletristic tradition. (...) In a very real sense, the Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write." (Gates & McKay, 1996: xxvii-xxviii)

In general terms, the African-American tradition began as a way to prove the humanity of black individuals. As we will see in the next chapter, one of the white power structures' main discourse was that blacks were intellectually inferior to the white majority. However, at the same time slavery supporters spread these ideas of an unintelligent black individual, in 1740 South Carolina was prohibiting black slaves from learning or being taught how to read and write in English, which reveals an ambivalence in that perception.²⁴ Essentially, the slavery system was perfectly planned to keep black people ignorant and thus more easily subjugated. Since they were prevented from becoming literate, it was a difficult task for them to prove their humanity and intellectual competence through literature, especially when black people were believed to be feral and out of touch with their emotional and sensitive side (*See* Jefferson; Gates and McKay, 1996: xxi). In fact, even when black slaves presented their written literature (since some slaves managed to learn how to read and write), they were highly doubted by white people in places of power. Therefore, they were subjected to tests and authentication procedures that assured that they could produce literature according to the white standards. Gates & McKay (1996: xxxi-xxxii) explain that was the case of Phillis Wheatley, the first black person to release poetry in English. Wheatley, who was a teenager in 1773, was tested by a group of white men of which none of them seemed to work in the literature field, according to the description:

For there, gathered in a semicircle, sat eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens. Among them was John Erving, a prominent Boston merchant; the Reverend Charles Chauncey, pastor of the Tenth Congregational Church; and John Hancock, who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence. At the center of this group would have sat His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the colony, with Andrew Oliver, his lieutenant governor, close by his side. (Gates & McKay, 1996: xxxii)

Although we do not know which criteria these men based themselves on, we do know that Phillis Wheatley's poetry would have not been credible without their "Attestation", a piece of text in which it was declared that Wheatley was indeed capable of producing poetry according to Eurocentric standards, despite being a black slave. This is, clearly, a problem, because they were trying to establish European models, dismissing other forms of writing already existing in the continent, such as oral traditions by Native Americans, people of African descent or Latinx. Due to this dismissal and the need for African-Americans to prove their humanity, the need to document their history of struggle and the need to protest against the wrongdoings African-

²⁴ I believe this could be an explanation as to why the African-American tradition was not included in the main canon from the beginning (apart from the deliberate decision to keep African-Americans in the margin).

Americans had been the targets of, the African-American tradition gained its own individuality. Gates (1992: 53-54) explains that Europeans had been wondering whether Africans could produce “formal literature” since at least the 1600s. If they could master European arts and sciences, then, in the Europeans’ perspective, it would mean that “then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave” (1992: 53-54). African slaves were often put under experiments and their works were also extensively reviewed by white male individuals. “By 1750, the chain had become individualized; the human scale slid from ‘the lowliest Hottentot’ (black south Africans) to ‘glorious Milton and Newton’.” (Gates, 1992: 55). Having Africans mastering the European arts could mean that white people would have to consider black people as human and intelligent as they considered themselves to be, and, as a consequence they could not keep slavery institutionalized under the justification that Africans were innately inferior. Africans had to prove themselves to be exceptionally good, even better than the average white writers, in order to have their works acknowledged by whites. Due to power relations, they also had no choice but to depend on the whites’ approval (publication houses and critical reviews) sometimes, renouncing their own ways of speaking and writing as well as themes about black people that white publishers did not approve of (Gates, 1992: 66). If Africans were kept under bondage and with no access to literacy, then there would be no way for them to prove their humanity. Notwithstanding the importance of this conquest, as Gates remarks, “Black people [...] have not been ‘liberated’ from racism by their writings, and they accepted a false premise by assuming that racism would be destroyed once white racists became convinced that we were human, too.” (Gates, 1992: 65).

- **Tradition of Protest**

Throughout history we have seen multiple literary works being published as a form of political contestation in the U.S.A we have the example of Henry David Thoreau who wrote “Civil Disobedience” (1849) as a protest against the taxes that funded the Mexican-American war (1846-1848) and slavery. Within the African-American literary tradition we can look at slave narratives that, although they were mostly written to prove black peoples’ humanity, they also exposed slavery and condemned it, serving the abolitionist purpose²⁵.

²⁵ One of the early names when talking about abolitionist literature is Harriet Beecher Stowe and her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). At the time this book was a great example to show how horrible slavery was, however, as mindsets changed, black scholars and writers like James Baldwin noted that Stowe’s work was not good enough to be considered a good novel (see Baldwin, 1955), nor was Uncle Tom a character to be followed as he was submissive to whites, going against the true goal of African-Americans which was equality.

My aim, therefore, is to look at the African-American tradition of protest. I will look at some excerpts from *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (1996), and *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell (1994), and see what the opinion of some of the most influential African-American writers regarding the tradition of protest was. By doing this, I will be able to reflect on how the books I chose to analyse in this dissertation fit the African-American tradition of protest.

According to Richard Wright in "Blueprint for Negro Writing", prior to 1937 (which was when this essay was first published), the writing style amongst African-Americans was one that aimed to please white people in the power structures:

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. (Mitchell, 1994: 97)

Wright even emphasizes the black writers' submission to the white America through expressions such as "humble", "a-begging", "knee-pants of servility" and "French poodles". According to this excerpt, it seemed that the black writers Wright talks about submitted themselves to whites and, to an extent, even reinforced the stereotypes already existent in racist discourse. Despite the writers wanting to prove their humanity and perhaps how they were intellectually equal to whites, they were still seen as entertainment objects.

As I already mentioned, African-American people were considered to be devoid of human emotions and intellectual competence, therefore, in the eyes of the whites they could not write literature. Accordingly, the aim of the first African-American writers at the end of the 18th century and early 19th century was to prove their humanity through writing as we saw above (see Gates, 1992: 43-69).²⁶ They appealed to whites to acknowledge them as equals before God, however, some whites would only accept their requests as long as they did not interfere with the social order they benefitted from (Gates & McKay, 1996: 127). This conversation was

²⁶ According to the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, this wave of writers were included in "The Literature of Slavery and Freedom" (Gates & McKay, 1996: 127).

ongoing even after the abolition of slavery, during times when ex-slaves' priority was integration and social uplift. In his essay, Wright (Mitchell, 1994: 99) argues that "Negro writing" had taken two different paths, one that catered to the Negro masses, "unwritten and unrecognized", and another that catered to a minority group made up of a rising Negro bourgeoisie. Apparently like his preference leaned towards the former path, as it seems to refer to what Gates and McKay (1996: 1) have categorized as the Vernacular tradition. This tradition comprises cultural artefacts that are oral, from "church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, stories, and in our own era, rap songs" and even "dances, wordless music performances, stage shows and visual art forms of many sorts" (1996: 3). Wright (Mitchell, 1994: 100) believes that this vernacular, or folk path, should have been the one followed by African-American writers as it would have spread the values of black nationalism, reinforcing a black identity separated from Eurocentric values. Wright believes that instead of following this folk path, African-American writers invested too much of their time proving their humanity to the white audiences and that they could reproduce the European literary models.

This seemed to be the case of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Booker T. Washington who were influential from the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance (1865-1919) (Gates, Jr. & McKay, 1996: 488/884). These writers were two of the very few African-American writers who made it into the mainstream canon. However, they only made it by hiding their black identities and writing from white perspectives, or reproducing a misleading image of African-Americans, otherwise their works would not be published (Redding, 1949: 108-109):

There can be no question as to the power of the traditional concepts. The Negro writer reacted to them in one of two ways. Either he bowed down to them, writing such stories as would do them no violence; or he went to the opposite extreme and wrote for the purpose of invalidating, or at least denying, the tradition. Dunbar might have done the former.

Redding explains that Dunbar's writing barely included any mention to African-Americans²⁷, yet, when that was the case, he tended to describe his black characters as "whimsical, simple, folksy, not-too-bright souls, all of whose social problems are little ones, and all of whose emotional cares can be solved by the intellectual or spiritual equivalent of a stick of red peppermint candy" (1949:108-109). This description seems to echo Harriet Beecher Stowe's

²⁷ By any means does this imply that it should be required of every African-American writer to write about the African-American experience; however, according to Redding, Dunbar and Washington gave inaccurate representations of black people in their works.

Uncle Tom, whose image was repeated to such an extent that, for white people, this became the true representation of black people: "White Americans had become used to a myth – had, indeed, convinced themselves that myth was reality. All the instruments of social betterment – schools, churches, lodges adopted by colored people were the subjects of ribald jokes and derisive laughter." (Redding, 1949: 110) This made it almost impossible for black writers to permeate the main tradition with their own representations of themselves.

It was apparent that only a certain kind of African-American writing was accepted into the canon, which was the case of Booker T. Washington's. Although he acknowledged that African-Americans should be granted equality, his priorities were laid on African-Americans' assimilating the European models so they could be accepted by the whites and "prepared" for citizenship (Gates & McKay, 1996: 465). Washington managed to found the Tuskegee Institute, an interracial project that aimed to "educate" African-Americans and of which Washington was the first president, yet, people were still segregated at the Institute, or at least nothing seemed to be done to associate white students and black students (Gates & McKay, 1996: 465). His ideals were appealing enough for white people to consider him the voice for black people, making him a token Black of sorts (Redding, 1949:111). However, his figure was contested by some African-Americans, such as W.E.B. DuBois, since he only represented a minor part of the African-American community and he was also not playing for their best interests politically. The African-American position was going through a path that would mean submitting to the European models and stopping the resistance against the ongoing segregation present in the country.

In response to this situation in which only a few African-American voices were being heard, the 1920s were witness to the Harlem Renaissance, one of the richest eras regarding African-American culture, especially when it came to music, dance and literature. The 1920s was a decade of economic prosperity, since Europe was recovering from the damages provoked by World War I, and the US had great leverage in relation to European countries. They were thriving on capitalism and at the time they were the biggest economic power. Due to the Great Migration, the number of African-Americans in the North increased in particular Harlem, since it became a black neighbourhood. Although African-Americans did not benefit from *The Roaring Twenties'* economical boost as much as European-Americans did, they still had better conditions than the African-Americans in the South. It was during the Harlem Renaissance that the Negro was redefined as the "New Negro". Alain Locke explains how the New Negro is different from the Old Negro. The New Negro wants to be understood instead of being pitied as a problem that needs a solution (Locke, 1925: p. 27), he wants to be acknowledged as an

American citizen who was crucial in the building of the US as a truly democratic nation (1925: 31):

It must be increasingly recognized that the Negro has already made very substantial contributions, not only in his folk-art, music especially, which has always found appreciation, but in larger, though humbler and less acknowledged ways. For generations the Negro has been the peasant matrix of that section of America which has most undervalued him, and here he has contributed not only materially in labor and in social patience, but spiritually as well. (Locke, 1925: 31)

Margaret Walker was one of the main black novelists and poets in the 20th century. She is known for preaching for racial awakening and re-telling African-American's history in her works. One of her most notorious poems, "For My People" (1942), is a good example of how she addresses black people's struggles in the US and calls for racial uplifting. Twenty-five years after Locke's *New Negro* (1925), Walker echoes his discourse by saying that the negro:

...grew away from the status of the exotic, the accidentally unusual Negro, the talented tenth of what the white audience chose to consider an otherwise mentally infantile minority group whose masses were illiterate, disenfranchised, exploited, and oppressed. Negroes became members of a new school of writers who were no longer isolated because of color, who were integrated around the beliefs that created the New Deal (Walker, 1950: 127-128).

This new generation of blacks moves away from the ones Richard Wright described as submissive poets in "Blueprint for Negro Writing". No longer aiming to be objects of entertainment, African-American writers were running away from the dominant canon and its norms (Walker, 1950: 132). Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown wrote poems including the pattern of the Blues, while other writers like Zora Neale Hurston were using the African-American dialect in their works. That earned her critical acclaim and the status of one of the great names of African-American literature. However, these new forms were not always well received as there were some ongoing generational conflicts.

The Harlem Renaissance gave place to an era where writers were also critics of other writers' works. According to Mitchell (1994:7) Richard Wright changed the African-American literary protest line with his novel *Native Son* (1940) in which the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, commits horrid crimes. The novel is very controversial among black readers, who criticize Wright for giving back to whites the stereotypical image of the negro they had ingrained in their racist

minds. Wright, however, seems to have wanted to present his fictional character as an inevitable result of the U.S.A capitalist and racist system. Nevertheless, Bigger Thomas is seen by Baldwin as another version of Uncle Tom who accepts his life as predestined instead of something that is mutable through his own will (Mitchell, 1994: p. 7). Essentially, this was not the protest direction African-American literature should be taking according to the critics and it also seems that this idea does not meet Locke's New Negroes who were not dependent on whites and did not blame their life conditions solely on the worlds' circumstances. This dependency on white critics' validation did not disappear for some, like Arthur P. Davis and J. Saunders Redding, who welcomed the idea of their literature being appreciated by whites, but then, others like Zora Neale Hurston thought that white critics were only open to images of African-Americans when the aim of most black writers was to expand all images of black people (Mitchell, 1994: 9).

Hughes writes "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), a manifesto for black writers that encourages them to write freely and to resist the pressure of whites' or blacks' expectations and, in the same year, W.E.B Dubois, editor of *The Crisis*, and also one of the main figures in the African-American literary scene and also in the fight for African-American rights as he co-founded the NAACP, delivered a speech at the Annual Conference of the NAACP (which was later published in *The Crisis* with the title "Criteria of Negro Art") where he criticized the lack of morality and political content within the works of younger writers, as he saw artistic expression as essentially political. In the meantime, younger writers saw the Harlem Renaissance as an opportunity to keep producing their art without necessarily linking it to political movements (Gates & McKay, p. 934). The Harlem Renaissance ended with the arrival of The Great Depression of 1929 which deeply affected African-Americans as they were the group who suffered the most during this time (Mitchell, 1994: p. 6).

Meanwhile, African-American Literature became so notorious and distinct that Gwendolyn Brooks was the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her *Annie Allen* poetry book; Ralph Ellison was the first to win the National Book Award, in 1957 for his novel *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison was the first to earn a Nobel Prize, in 1993, just to name three of the most important awards, nationally and internationally. Before African-American literature reached its most stable point in the 1990s with the release of an African-American literary anthology in a canonical publishing house, black writers kept protesting, especially during the 60s and 70s with the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic that followed the Civil Rights movements. It was then that writers really claimed for a black aesthetic that deviated further from European-American forms (Mitchell, 1994: 10-11).

For some, however, like Arthur P. Davis, an influential university teacher and literary scholar (although his ideas were expressed forty years prior to the release of the Norton anthology), entering the mainstream meant that the African-American literary tradition of protest was coming to an end. In his point of view, African-Americans were finally seeing a door for integration in the country. This meant, for him, that black art was losing its protesting features:

This change of climate, however, has inadvertently dealt the Negro writer a crushing blow. Up to the present decade, our literature has been predominantly a protest literature. Ironical though it may be, we have capitalized on oppression (I mean, of course, in a literary sense). Although we may deplore and condemn the cause, there is great creative motivation in a movement which brings all members of a group together and cements them in a common bond. (...) The possibility of imminent integration has tended to destroy the protest element in Negro writing. (Davis, 1956: 157)

Throughout his whole essay “Integration and Race Literature” (1956) he implies that although African-Americans struggled for centuries at the hands of white supremacy, that sort of oppression fuelled the artistry within writers. Although art is important, the equality and safety of minorities should be prioritized. In addition, African-Americans were still being the target of racism, segregation, ghettoization and hate in the 50s. A year before this essay was published, Emmett Till had been brutally murdered. Even afterwards, despite all the victories African-American people achieved with the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, black people continued to be oppressed til this day. If integration had indeed been fulfilled, then it would mean that the goals of equality for African-Americans had been achieved. If writers in the 50s were indeed deviating from protesting in their works, it did not mean they were all succumbing to the dominant models and giving up resistance. They were, instead, legitimately feeling freer to address other themes in their art.

Regrettably, as I mentioned before in this dissertation, African-Americans are still oppressed, and, in response, black artists are still protesting. Perhaps not in the same way they did more than two hundred years ago, but according to the times. Art is still one of the main vehicles through which black people (and people in general) protest against injustice. I believe it is one of the most powerful ways of resistance, and now, more than ever, with the existence of online platforms, it is easier to get messages of protest across through art. In music we have had rappers like the NWA and Queen Latifah in the 90s, and right now we have a whole generation of rappers such as Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino, and not as known as the first two, Noname. *The Hate U Give*, *Dear Martin* and *Tyler Johnson Was Here* are all written by young African-

American writers and they are about present and pressing issues within the African- American community such as police brutality and the murder of young black kids. Although novels do not have to give a solution to these problems, they point out many issues regarding racism amongst the U.S.A society. The novels mirror real life and their writing is not as abstract and enigmatic as the writing in novels like Toni Morrison's, so I would not say these novels have the aesthetic value as other works in the canon. However, the books are entertaining and since these are books aimed at young people, they also go straight to the point, making it easier for beginners to start reading and interpreting. They may not be part of the literary canon ever, but they are making a statement regarding the struggles of black people, therefore, I think they may fit the protest tradition, just doing so in updated modes.

III - REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY IN THE YA NOVELS

As we saw in the previous chapter, African-American people have used literature as a way of protesting and empowering themselves in U.S.A white supremacist society. In general, not only is literature great for entertainment and didactic purposes but it can also teach people about the world and other people's experiences. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone and *Tyler Johnson Was Here* by Jay Coles are books written by young black people who also write about young black people. The novels' theme, police brutality against black teenagers, encompasses a number of experiences black teenagers in real life can relate to since the authors are young, they show more accurately how black teenagers feel, and they also offer potential solutions to their life issues. Although these books are about black teenagers, that does not mean other age and racial/ethnic groups should not read them as well. By reading about other people's experiences, they can change their perspectives, namely on racism, white supremacy and violence against kids. Stuart Hall argues that we can talk about representation through a semiotic approach in which we see how language creates meanings (poetics) and how symbolism works. But we can also talk about representation through a discourse approach, in which we connect those symbolisms to the construction of identities and experiences, how we make sense of them and how we make practices out of them (politics). Essentially, the discourse approach allows writers to have the power to translate their real-life experiences into words that create meanings and then give people the ability to think about their own experiences, emotions and ideas, and in the end find some solutions or new ways of thinking (Hall, 1997: 6). However, some wonder if literature can be representational since language can only be given meaning through experiences and it cannot be the experience itself. Young explains that the drawing of a wombat is not the wombat itself, however, since the drawing reminds people of a real wombat, we can say the drawing is a representation of a wombat. In literature the same applies. Although the characters in the novels are fictional, the way writers constructed them with the use of language made them recognizable to readers (1999: 133). The victims of police brutality in the books do not exist; however, the symbolism and the language used to construct them makes us readers associate them with people like Michael Brown and Tamir Rice who were people who really existed and went through the experience the books try to mimic.

- **Main Themes**

The Hate U Give, by Angie Thomas tells the story of a 16-year-old black girl named Starr Carter. Despite living in a black ghetto, Starr attends a private school with a majority of white students.

After leaving a party in her neighbourhood with one of her childhood friends, Khalil, both teenagers are stopped by a white police officer. This encounter ends up in an unarmed black Khalil killed by the police officer. The story then revolves around Starr's life after Khalil's death, while she deals with her identities in two distinct social spheres (the black ghetto and her white preparatory school) and the responsibility of being the sole witness of her best friend's murder.

Dear Martin, by Nic Stone is very similar to the previous novel in terms of the topics addressed. The main character is 17-year-old black boy, Justyce McAllister, who is also a student attending a majorly white preparatory boarding school. Similarly to Starr, he lives in a black ghetto, however, he spends most of his time at school. Justyce too becomes a victim of police brutality more than once, ending up witnessing the death of his best friend, Manny. The book shows how Justyce comes to terms with his black identity and how he uses it as a space in which white people put him at jeopardy.

The third novel *Tyler Johnson Was Here*, by Jay Coles is the most different one out of all three. As well as the first teenage characters, 17-year-old Marvin Johnson is a black teenager boy who lives in a black ghetto, however, rather than attending a private school in the suburbs, he goes to the local high school in the ghetto he lives in. Besides depicting another victim of police brutality, Marvin's story is about how he copes with his twin brother being killed by a police officer and how he bypasses the stereotypes that society expects him to follow.

If we were to identify one common theme present in *The Hate U Give*, *Dear Martin* and *Tyler Johnson Was Here* we could say it is racial profiling and its connection to the ongoing police brutality against black young people in the U.S.A. However, by narrowing the novels to one single theme we are ignoring the complexity conveyed through their characters. Despite the main focus of these three books being on the recent deaths of black male teenagers, we are able to notice that other themes are also featured. It is important to use intersectionality, a lens through which we are able to look at the interrelation of multiple complex identities (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1991). Although this is an idea which emerged within feminist studies, I think it can be very useful as a tool to understand the characters (in which the majority are teenage boys) and the issues they raise in relation to their cultural contexts and constructions of identity. The characters' identities are made by their race, but also by their gender, class, age group, sexuality, etc. If we keep an intersectional stance, we can look at all these factors and see how the characters are perceived, judged and conditioned by the outer society while they themselves negotiate their identities in a crucial stage of development in their lives. As Crenshaw claims,

people's issues with race and gender should not be regarded as separate. They interact in various ways to shape the multiple dimensions of experience (1991: 1244).

Exactly because racism is so prevalent in the United States, it is the key factor playing in these novels. Whether we talk about gender, class, professional status, etc, right now, race ends up affecting all these social formations, hence my belief that we should look at their play in intersectional terms. In the three books, Starr, Justyce and Marvin are confronted with the implications of growing up as black in America. They are often discriminated by police officers, schoolmates, and white people in general. They are also confronted with a perception by other people, especially whites, set on characteristics that are said to be inherent to black people, especially when it comes to the way of talking, dressing, the music they listen to, the schools they attend and the kind of people they interact with. However, as we will see later, those characteristics are socially constructed, and they are not set to only one group of people. Due to centuries of oppression, black people were denied the ability to speak and fight for their rights. Because black people could not create their own reputation, white people did it for them resulting in negative stereotypes about black people (violence, laziness, inferiority, etc.) and them not being able to have access to privileges such as schooling, which leads to the denial of jobs that may lead to poverty and many other problems such as criminality. This creates a cycle of oppression some African-Americans believe they cannot run away from, ending up perpetuating the negative stereotypes about them and applying them to other African-Americans. I mentioned schooling because that is one of the playing themes in the novels. The characters are high school students. Justyce and Starr are attending private schools, which some of their black peers associate with whites (since those schools are usually not violent like schools in ghettos are and they are also more well-equipped in staff and resources), therefore, they tend to see Justyce and Starr as less black for being more privileged. Yet, getting an education at a private school is not inherently white, even if it is something that the majority of black people do not have access to. This shows that the characters' blackness is constantly being challenged by not only white racist police officers and their white peers, but also by their black peers and educators. The characters must keep finding ways of negotiating their blackness. The racism and the stereotypes perpetuated by white supremacy that challenges the characters' blackness is the fact they are constantly being put against their white peers in interpersonal relationships, but mostly, in the academic and professional sphere:

Historically black men are expected to be violent, aggressive menaces to society, so to insert their masculinity as an acceptable part of society, they must take up a role that contrasts the image of the Brute or Nat. The Brute is defined as an angry, physically

strong, animalistic, Black man who is prone to sexual violence (against white women). ("Masculinity: A Depiction of White Manhood vs. Black Manhood")

The 313 known Black victims of extrajudicial killings in 2012 became illustrative of harsh realities confronting Black men and boys, including but not limited to police brutality, racial profiling, and mass incarceration. Racial, gender, and cultural stereotypes about Black men and boys as criminals, thugs, violent, and hyperaggressive permeated discussions about what contributed to state violence against Black men and boys. (Lindsey, 2015: 235)

Although many attempts have been made to prove that African-American are as human as any other human, some still believe in racist discourses that remind us of Thomas Jefferson's which state that black men are inherently animalesque and feral, hence believing this constructed identity is immutable. This image is ingrained in the culture in such a depth that it was projected unto children like Emmett Till and Tamir Rice in spite of one century in-between both cases. Moreover, these stereotypes have been repeated so many times throughout history that some black men have internalized them. This reality has been transferred to the novels. There are some characters that seem to fit the stereotype of the violent delinquent black man like King (a gang leader) in *The Hate U Give*, and some gang members like Trey and Quan in *Dear Martin* and Johntae in *Tyler Johnson Was Here*. However, the authors have succeeded in showing the readers that there is a bigger factor that explains why some of these men end up falling into the stereotype and that is poverty and police brutality. As the U.S.A keeps black people underprivileged, some of them do not have access to services like healthcare or to a lifestyle of consumerism that white people can afford to have. As the system keeps denying black people the same financial privileges white people have, some turn to drug dealing in gangs. As police officers are the ones killing black people, some feel the need to do their own policing through gangs as they are not protected by the state. Moreover, the authors also include other types of black men, such as well succeeded students who are not violent or fathers who used to be criminals but managed to change their fate, to show that black men and black people in general do not obey to just one personality, as bell hooks claims (1994: p. 247). Those representations can be seen through the main characters, Justyce and Marvin, and characters like Maverick, Starr's father. Justyce and Marvin both struggle with the criminal angry black men stereotypes and in certain situations they attempt to conceal their anger in order not to be perceived as violent, even when they are being wronged. Maverick, Starr's father, is an ex-convict and a former gang member fitting into the criminal and violent man stereotype, however, he decided to leave that life and open a store so he could stop his children from getting involved in a cycle of poverty

and criminality.

Regrettably, black women and people who do not identify themselves as women or men are not greatly represented in these books, apart from *The Hate U Give*, whose main character is a teenage girl. Perhaps this has to do with the books I chose to analyse, or it could also have to do with the fact that black women have been kept outside this particular stereotype while being associated with other kinds whenever what Lindsey calls “Black violability” is discussed which she defines as “a construct that attempts to encapsulate both the lived and historical experiences of Black people with state-initiated and state-sanctioned violence.” (2015:235). As I have previously mentioned, black women experience racism and misogyny in different ways than cis black men and cis white women do, respectively, therefore, their fights need to be approached differently. However, because the focus of the fight against racism and misogyny is on cis black men and white women, black women’s cases are often invisible. Undoubtedly black women have also been the target of stereotypes produced by racism, such as the belief that they are prone to becoming drug addicts or follow paths of prostitution. The authors break that wall and just as they do with the male characters, they not only include characters that fall into the drug traffic, but also women with successful professional careers or women who aim to succeed, such as Starr in *The Hate U Give* or Faith in *Tyler Johnson Was Here*. There is also a brief mention to Ivy, who is an LGBT+ character in the latter novel.

Another social formation directly influenced by race and racism is class. The consequences of racism being systemic triggers inequality in many sectors, be it education, employment or opportunities in general, determining social mobility. Although affirmative action has been implemented in companies and educational institutions, black people are often denied jobs or college entries due to racial bias. This results in them not being able to afford services such as health care or education. So, sometimes, due to the perpetual cycle of poverty caused by the U.S.A social system, and the lack of belief and hope in the social system, people like Tyler and Khalil turn to illegal sources of income like drug dealing.

In addition, another theme that is present in the novels is age. It is important to remember that one of the main points of these novels is the fact that the majority of the victims of police brutality are black teenagers. As we saw in the first chapter, black kids are still targets of racial profiling.

- **Representation of the main characters and the fatal victims**

Before we see how the characters deal with their identities, we should firstly look into how the authors constructed them and how real-life people can identify with them. Since the novels are included in the Young Adult Fiction category it only makes sense for the main characters to be young. We are presented three duos of teenagers: Starr and Khalil in *The Hate U Give*, Justyce and Manny in *Dear Martin* and Marvin and Tyler in *Tyler Johnson Was Here*. Starr is the only main representation of teenage girls out of all the characters. Her family used to be poor, her father used to deal drugs in a gang, and he was also in prison for three years. Fortunately, since her father decided to stop being a criminal and due to the help of her mother who is a nurse, her family was able to pull itself from poverty. Despite still living in a somewhat poor area, Garden Heights, she attends a private preparatory school in the suburbs, Williamson Preparatory School which is also situated next to her police officer uncle's house. Before Starr's mother got her degree as a nurse, their family lived in bad conditions and they could not afford to give their children some material goods they now can. Moreover, as her father got arrested when she was three, she was mainly raised by her mother and her uncle, meaning that her family was somewhat dysfunctional at some point. Even though the present Starr is somewhat at a more privileged standpoint and mainly represents low middle-class black girls, she also used to represent lower class black girls. Her neighbourhood being a black ghetto and her school being a private preparatory school in the suburbs creates in her a division of identities, as we will see in the next section. The only reason why she is attending the school in the suburbs is that she had seen her best-friend being killed at the age of 10 and her parents thought it was safer to move her and her brothers to another school since the local public school was problematic and known for violent episodes. There is not much information about her physical appearance besides her dark complexion, therefore we cannot pinpoint a specific type of girl. The books' original cover presents a girl of a deep complexion, however, in the Walker Books edition, the cover is the actress Amandla Stenberg, who plays Starr in the film adaptation of the book and who is also of mixed race (her mother is a black American woman and her father is a white Danish man). This takes the reader to infer that Starr can represent any black girl and not just one kind. Throughout the book it is mentioned that Starr is an avid fan of *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, the *Harry Potter* series, the *High School Musical* trilogy, and artists such as Beyoncé, Drake and the Jonas Brothers. All these references are common not only in the U.S.A but also internationally, therefore making Starr even more relatable to a wider range of readers.

Although Starr does seem proud of her blackness as we shall see later, she tends to tame it down in order to be better integrated at Williamson, the private school. She does it as a form of self-

protection since her white school mates could easily essentialize her to fit the stereotype of a black girl. Besides her white boyfriend, Chris, she is close to Hailey, who's Caucasian, and Maya, who is of Chinese descent. Starr often conceals her Garden Heights life from her Williamson friends, especially when it comes to the deaths of her best-friend and her own involvement in the Khalil's death incident as she is not ready to merge her two realities together, nor do her friends (apart from Chris and Maya) seem to understand her experience of living in a ghetto and being a victim of police brutality. Her friend Hailey, consciously or not, often makes less pleasant commentaries about Starr or Maya's cultures. However, Starr avoids being confrontational, so she is not seen as the one person who turns every conversation into a race issue.

When in Garden Heights, some could say Starr is also non-confrontational as she takes a while to publicly protest against her friends' death and their racial profiling. Yet, this is more about being non-confrontational, this is about her own protection since her speaking up would mean she would be fighting the system that violated her rights:

I've seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black, and all hell breaks loose. I've retweeted RIP hashtags, reblogged pictures on Tumblr, and signed every petition out there. I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person, and I'm too afraid to speak. (Thomas, 2017: 38)

As a witness of Khalil's murder, most people would expect Starr to speak up and expose the truth about her and Khalil's encounter with the police officer, and perhaps because we are talking about a fiction work, it could be expected that Starr would turn into some sort of heroine. However, it would not be realistic for a teenage black girl not to be scared of being in the limelight speaking about an issue like murder or the consequences of accusing a white police officer of murder. On one side, Starr is scared because the justice system is not on her side as she and Khalil were profiled as criminals; on the other side, Starr is being pressured by one of the Garden Heights' gangs, Kings Lords, not to speak, since they considered Khalil to be one of them, and by looking into Khalil's case could lead to the gang's illicit activities being exposed. Besides exposing herself within her school environment as an Other, in the end Starr would be a target of the police forces and the Kings Lords, potentially having her life in danger. Besides police brutality, gang violence is one of the main causes of death among racial minorities.

So far, Starr has been just another victim of police brutality who is trying to live her life as low-key as possible. However, her non-confrontational stance starts to change as her integrity is

continually put a risk, either by the King Lords gang, or by the justice system who insists on taking the side of the white police officer who killed Khalil. Despite her young age, Starr gets conscious that her testimony could help the fight for herself and other black people's rights. She becomes unafraid to call out her friends for their offensive commentaries and most of all she becomes unafraid of publicly exposing both the police officer who killed her friend and the Lord King's leader who is responsible for many of the Garden Heights problems. Starr becomes the voice and the example for many black girls and other vulnerable members of minorities who might have been or might end up in the same situation as she.

In fact, Angie Thomas wrote *THUG* (and *On The Come Up*) in hopes that black teenagers, especially black girls, could relate to her book. On multiple interviews on YouTube (see: CBS "This Morning", "The Daily Show" with Trevor Noah, @booksandquills) she mentions that she hated reading when she was younger due to the lack of characters that looked and acted like her. Thomas writes not only to give young readers something they can identify themselves with, but she also wants them to read more. She explains that some teens are just reluctant for not having found the right book, therefore she felt the need to give them what she did not have when growing up. Talking about instances when she has met young black readers, she recalls times when they would come crying to her talking about how Starr or Bri (the protagonist of *On The Come Up*) were them. Moreover, she also urges publishers to accept stories about black kids because not only do black kids want and need to read about themselves, but there are also kids from other ethnic groups that read about black kids and identify with them, therefore, that kind of stories could change people's perspectives.

Just like Starr, Justyce is a 17-year-old teenager who also attends a private boarding school, Braselton Preparatory Academy. Despite his hometown also being a poor black neighborhood, Justyce stays at the school's dormitories during the school year. There is not much information about his financial status, but we do learn he has a full scholarship to attend the school, meaning that without those funds he would not afford it. Like Starr, he also sets himself apart from less privileged kids. However, we know that his family was also dysfunctional when he was a kid. Justyce's father suffered from PTSD from the military and was abusive towards his mother, but he ended up passing away when Justyce was 11, so he was raised entirely by his mother. In Justyce's case, he avoided being confrontational as he did not want to be perceived as a violent person just like his father. This should not be a cause-effect relationship but, regrettably, oftentimes being inserted in a predominantly white environment in a society as unequal as the U.S.A's, means non-whites feel conditioned by the prevailing stereotypes and also the need to work harder to prove their skills as professionals. I believe Justyce represents those black

teenagers who are constantly pressured to prove their worth since not only is he part of a racial minority, but he is also from a lower class. He is at the top of his year, he is the captain of the school's debate team and he envisages to be a future Yale student. Like Starr, Justyce seems to try to live up his life as one of the token black boys at his school and he also avoids being confrontational whenever his white schoolmates try to reduce his humanity and his intellect. He is fully aware of the disparities between black Americans and white Americans, however most times he avoids discussing them because he doesn't "wanna be the black guy accused of 'playing the race card'" (Stone, 2017: 79) when there is the probability his complaints might be diminished or ignored. However, as Justyce keeps facing situations where his existence is threatened – including his being a target of police brutality more than once and witnessing the death of his best friend – ,the more he feels the need to speak, and although he is not able to change much around him, I believe if real-life Justyces start speaking little by little, it is possible to go from small scale to big scale movements. Just like Angie Thomas, Nic Stone, the author of *Dear Martin*, felt that assigned reading at high schools did not reflect her experience as a black person ("Nic Stone: Writing for a Change"). Moved by the death of a black teenage boy, Jordan Davis, Stone decided she had to write something that black kids could relate to, and something to spark conversations about police brutality against black people. Her aim was to raise awareness among high school students and make them step into their agency, using their voices to speak up.

Both Starr and Justyce have white significant others, which I think is important to mention. Starr's father and Justyce's mother are against those relationships, the only reason being their race. The novels show readers that fighting for their rights as black individuals and fighting against white supremacy does not mean that they are supporting an anti-white people agenda nor are they turning their backs on their community. These interracial relationships give a chance to multiculturalism. Racism will not cease to exist, and some white people will still look at black people through negative lenses, yet, that does not cancel out white people who acknowledge the struggle of African-Americans and join the fight.

As I mentioned before, Marvin is the most different out of the main characters in these three novels. Like Starr and Justyce, he also lives in a black ghetto, but he attends the local public high school. Unlike Starr and Justyce, his parents are not middle class, nor does he have a scholarship that grants him a good education. In fact, it is mentioned that he attends the worst rated high school in his state (Coles, p. 38). Before his twin brother Tyler was murdered, Marvin lived with him and their mother. Marvin and Tyler's father had been arrested (the narrator leads us to believe he was wrongly accused). Out of all the novels' protagonists, Marvin and Tyler are

the most unprivileged. The school bus doesn't even stop in their neighbourhood (Coles, 2018: 24) as it is dangerous. We can assume his mother does not have a good paying job since she owns a very old car, cannot afford to buy her children a phone each and, most importantly, she cannot afford to visit her husband since the facility he is in is five hours away from where they live. Contrasting with Starr and Justyce, whose physical descriptions do not go further than vague mentions to hairstyles and their obvious skin color, Marvin is presented as someone with a complexion on the deeper range black skins and with a wide nose (Coles, 2018: 24). It may seem irrelevant, but due to centuries of African features being ridiculed in favour of Eurocentric beauty standards (lighter skin, looser hair, narrower noses), representation of characters that have features such as Marvin's is important for black readers' self-esteem. As a character, Marvin represents a big number of boys that are rarely represented in books or any sort of fictional work.

Starr and Justyce, as I have mentioned, attend schools in which the students are mainly white and unaware of their lives as victims of racial profiling. Besides the police officers they are often confronted with their white schoolmates' prejudice, whereas Marvin has to deal with other black kids who are gang members and his educators, like the school dean. As we will see later, the gang members seem to deem Marvin as somewhat less of a black person for being a good student, whereas his educators and other adults Marvin encounters deem him as unworthy of education or protection. Like the other two main characters he does not want to fall into the stereotype of the black gangster but, at the same time, he does not want to be deemed as less black. Thus, one of his fights lies in proving to the world his blackness is as valid as any other kind of blackness despite not wanting to be a gangster or despite not being up to the adult's standards of what a proper student/citizen should be.

Because Marvin comes from a poor family where his father is in prison and his brother was murdered, some people like those who interviewed him for his MIT application seem to want to make a "sob-story" out of Marvin therefore performing affirmative action on him. Some people believe that black people can only be seen as valid members of society if their capabilities are exceptional, especially if they bear a tragic life story. Others, as we will see ahead, expect black people to fail. Due to these expectations, Marvin stops living according to other people's standards and affirms his own self as a black individual as valid as any other. Marvin is an important character since he shows readers that being black does not mean one big immutable identity and he also shows, like Starr and Justyce, that he has a voice. The author, Jay Coles, says this novel is partially based on his life experiences, as he had a cousin who died

at the hands of police brutality (Cary, 2018). When he wrote the novel, not only did he want to speak up and represent teens who had barely been represented before, but he also wanted to let his anger and frustration out due to the injustices he saw witnessing (Cary, 2018).

Looking back at the novels, one could think that *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* are only representing “middle class” African-Americans instead of being more eclectic in their character choices, however, I believe the authors aimed to show that racism sees no social or economic status. What I mean by this is that due to racial profiling, racists do not know their targets’ social and economic backgrounds behind skin color and they presume all black people are prone to be criminals regardless of their class. An example of this “class-blindness” is the murder of Manny. Even more than Starr and Justyce, Manny is the perfect example of the black person who has been raised in a predominantly white social environment. Before being let go for protesting against his son’s murder, his father was an executive vice president of a big financial corporation (Stone, 2017: 155), therefore, Manny and his family are part of a comfortable middle class of African-Americans. He attends the same preparatory school as Justyce and is one of his oldest friends. Like his friend, he is a good student and he is part of the school’s basketball team. According to the stereotypes, Manny is the example of what a perfect black citizen should be like. Besides Justyce, Manny is friends with a group of white teenage boys of which Jared stands out the most, since he seems to be the most opinionated about black people, always degrading them through his comments. I will mention this group again in a later section, but summarizing it briefly, they are the one group of people who are unaware of their privilege as white upper-class boys. Manny is the one black guy who is very lenient towards his friends, even allowing them to make jokes at his and other black people’s expenses. Justyce is stricter with Jared and his friends, whereas Manny will go to the length of joking with them in order not to be left out, even if it hurts him. After a period of reflection, Manny does acknowledge that he should censure his white friends’ actions and become more vocal if he feels like he is being wronged by them or any other person. Unfortunately, we can not see his evolution as he was murdered by a white supremacist. Manny’s death shows us that even if Manny was very class privileged, he is still a target of racial profiling and of a hate crime solely for being black.

Usually, kids like Khalil and Tyler are the victims of hate crimes, but for the sole reason that upper class African-Americans live in areas that are not usually patrolled by police officers, while ghettos like Garden Heights or Tyler’s neighborhood are constantly targeted for drug dealing, gang violence, etc. Khalil and Tyler represent the children who come from poor and dysfunctional families whose life will hardly turn around, since the system wants them to be

perpetually unprivileged. Khalil was raised by his grandmother because his mother was absent and also a drug addict. Khalil's grandmother, who was the family's breadwinner, became sick with cancer and was fired from her work. However, without work she could not pay for her medical expenses nor could she support her grandchildren. Supporting his family financially was the reason why Khalil started dealing drugs. We later find out through DeVante that Khalil was definitely not part of the King Lords' gang, despite selling drugs for King, the gang's leader. According to DeVante, Khalil's mother had stolen from King and to avoid having his mother murdered, Khalil started paying her debt by selling drugs for King (Thomas, 2017: 234). "Look, Marvin, it's not easy without Dad around, and Mama can't support us on her own. You see her struggling. Can't pay the bills, let alone send you to college. Johntae's going to help with that. So that's all this is." (Coles, 2018: 52)

Tyler's situation is similar to Khalil's. His father had been arrested unjustly, according to Marvin, so his mother supported him and Marvin by herself. We already know Marvin's family struggles financially, so Tyler joined Johntae's gang because his family had no other form of income and in his mind drug dealing could solve their monetary problems. Just like him, many kids turn to gangs with the illusion that they will be economically and physically secure.

Stereotypically, Manny is the perfect example of what a black individual should be, whereas Khalil and Tyler are the example of what a black individual should not be. Through this lens, if one falls into the stereotype of "gangster", "ghetto" or "hood"-like, then, one's murder is justified. As I already mentioned this does not stop white supremacists from attacking innocent black people. When Manny and Justyce were shot by an off-duty agent, the officer did not know about the boys' curriculum or their socio-economic class. For him they were just "...WORTHLESS NIGGERS SONS OF BITCHES" (Stone, 2017: 118). And this is how Manny, Khalil and Tyler are represented through the media, despite their never being represented as bad persons in the novels. We, the readers, also know they were doing nothing that would justify their deaths, just like the children we know to have been murdered in real life. Tyler was only going home and he tried to get away from the police officer who was attacking him (Coles, 2018:166), which seems to be echoing Michael Brown's shooting incident. Khalil was taking a brush out and asking Starr if she was ok (Thomas, 2017: 27); Manny was listening to loud music and tried to defend himself from being called a "nigger son of a bitch" like any person would (Stone, 2017: 118-119).

After their deaths were made public, despite the statements made by the survivors, Starr and Justyce, and the leak of Tyler's shooting video that should be able to prove his innocence, there

were still multiple erroneous assumptions made about the victims, survivors and deceased, on social media, television, newspapers and even at court:

“There are multiple reports that a gun was found in the car”, the anchor claims. “There is also suspicion that the victim was a drug dealer as well as a gang member.” (Thomas, 2017: 140);

“The man was defending himself from thugs”, said Tison’s neighbor April Henry. “I’ve known Garrett for twenty-five years. If he says those boys had a gun, they had a gun.”(Stone, 2017: 131);

There on the screen, big and bold and bright and blatant, is a picture from Jared’s Halloween-Political-Statement-Turned-Brush-With-Death. Of course everyone else – Blake the Klansman included – has been cropped out of the version making national news. It just shows Justyce McAllister as Thug Extraordinaire. “We’ve heard about his grades, SAT scores, and admission to an Ivy League school”, the anchor says, “but a picture speaks a thousand words. This kid grew up in the same neighbourhood as the young man accused of murdering Garrett Tison’s partner more or less on a whim” (...) But if there’s one thing Jus knows from Shemar Carson and Tavarious Jenkins cases, it really doesn’t take more than a photo to sway mass opinion. (...) “You know what they say, Steven: you can remove he kid from the thug life... But ya can’t remove the thug life from the kid. (Stone, 2017: 148)

Though Tison’s claim that the teens had a gun was unsupported by evidence, the surviving teen, Justyce McAllister’s, exposed connection to known gang members, including sixteen-year-old Quan Banks, the young man charged with murdering Tison’s partner last August, cast a considerable pall over the proceedings. (Stone, 2017:193)

News outlets are clearly biased as they deliver news that are based on rumours not related to the cases, in the hopes of leading the public into believing the victims are actually villains. The first excerpt is trying to distract the public opinion from the fact that Khalil was unarmed at the moment he was killed with dubious information unrelated to the case. Even though Khalil did sell narcotics, he was not doing it at the time he was killed, nor did he present any threat to the police officer. The second excerpt puts forth presumptions made by people unconnected to Manny and Justyce’s shooting. The first half of the following quote shows an outlet that seems to be deliberately targeting Justyce, by showing a picture of him in a costume and cutting one of Manny’s friend who was dressed as a Ku Klux Klan member. On the day of the trial, the

attorney defending the police officer tried to appeal to the jury by mentioning Justyce's connections with Quan and other gang members which the last two excerpts show. The officer's attorney seemed to imply that it was Justyce and Manny's fault that they were shot: "Are you aware that my client witnessed the shooting death of his partner by a young man physically similar to yourself?" (Stone, 2017: 192). This proves the agent's racial bias against Justyce and Manny, since it is more than likely that if a white boy had killed his partner his reaction would have been different. The officer would not have targeted white teenagers if another white teenager had killed his partner. Moreover, the attorney highlighted a crime that is irrelevant to Justyce and Manny's shooting incident, trying to lead people to think they were gang members as well. Justyce realizes how deep racism is ingrained in the country:

"All I know is he [Martin Luther King] and Manny are dead, and I'm being cast as the bad guy." "I get that. Look, Jus, people need the craziness in the world to make some sort of sense to them. That idiot 'pundit' would rather believe you and Manny were thugs than believe a twenty-year veteran cop made a snap judgement based on skin color. He identifies with the cop. If the cop is capable of murder, it means he's capable of the same. He can't accept that. (...) But these people have to justify Garrett's actions. They *need* to believe you're a bad guy who got what he deserved in order for their world to keep spinning the way it always has." (Stone, 2017: 151)

Most white people in the U.S.A have been exposed for centuries to the idea that black people are inferior. These ideas have travelled generations and become the nation's foundation. So, when they are presented with cases that are clearly about racial bias, it is easier to accept the evil and dangerous representations of black people and other people of color than recognizing that racism is severely ingrained in the system and that that transfers to the law enforcement institutions. For them, to realize their values are immoral and cruel is inconceivable, therefore, they have to come up with a narrative they can believe in and impose on the masses.

"He was a drugdealer and a gangbanger," Hailey says "Somebody was gonna kill him eventually." (...) "... The cop probably did everyone a favor. One less drug dealer on the —" (Thomas, 2017: 337)

I pull out the phone I shared with Tyler and scroll through my Twitter feed until I find what they're talking about. Tweets that go beyond saying Tyler's a gangbanging thug.

Tweets that take it too fucking far. Tweets that say he deserved what he got. Shit about police having the right to protect themselves. I scroll until I see a video with a kid from school – some white guy named Lance Anderson, a senior at Sojo High. He and some other random kids with matching plain white shirts talk into the camera, saying how it’s such a shame that the cops are being punished for doing something real good for the city. He’s called for a protest in defense of the cop who murdered my brother; it’s going to happen on Christmas Day. (Coles, 2018: 192)

“Maybe if he wasn’t holding a bag of dope, he’d be alive. / Fuck black people. #WhiteLivesMatter / He looks like he’d rob a store. / What did you people want? To give him a freebie to commit a crime cause he’s black? He was a bad dude” (Coles, 2018:173) (bold in the original)

The way Khalil, Tyler, Manny and real-life victims are represented in news outlets permeates the social media and we can see the same racist stereotypical discourses being repeated over and over again. As we saw in the first chapter, statistics show that the percentage of white people who consume or sell drugs is higher than the percentage of black people that engages in such activities, yet, the former are not as much targeted as black people nor are they killed for the false suspicion of dealing drugs. It is clear that the victims are exclusively treated as criminals due to their skin color and no other reason.

Tyler, you’re in a better place. Heaven ain’t racist. / This kid was a fucking Basketball prodigy! I’ll miss playing after school with him. #RIPBro / You deserved better than this. Your family is in my prayers. Always. (Coles, 2018: 174) (bold in the original)

Fortunately, social media may also be the place for people to try and contradict the vilifying images created for the victims. Along with social media activism, the novels present many forms of protesting like wall graffities and demonstrations. Through the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on social media, people talked about the qualities of the victims, but most of all, they resisted the bad stereotypes created about them. An effort to clear the victims’ names was also made by Starr, Justyce and Marvin. Starr and Marvin created blogs to celebrate Khalil and Tyler’s lives, showing what the media did not show (Coles, 2018: 270). Starr included pictures of Khalil as an infant and included captions such as “The Khalil I know was afraid of animals.” (Thomas, 2017: 202-203) showing people his fragilities as a human being and as a teenage boy. This also works as way for Starr to remember Khalil as her best friend instead of just one more police

brutality casualty. Unfortunately, this type of resistance is barely effective since black people are still being killed and the bad stereotypes are increasingly more believable due to the U.S.A current Administration's ideologies.

- **Identities Challenged**

In these novels, as I have been emphasizing, the main characters are teenagers. Although they are still supposedly dependent on their parents or other sort of guardians, I believe it is during the adolescence phase that teenagers start to position themselves in the world surrounding them. Considering teenagers are social beings who move around different social circles such as their homes, schools, extracurricular activities and others, I believe they are able to establish multiple identities during this phase of their lives.

Stuart Hall (1995: 597) divides identity into three conceptions: the Enlightenment subject, the sociological subject and the post-modern subject. In general terms, in the first one's identity is conceived as pre-defined at birth and immutable till death; the second one is only formed in the interaction with the outside world, therefore, not autonomous; relating to the third one, the post-modern subject, Stuart Hall writes that it is:

[...] conceptualized as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Identity becomes a "moveable feast": formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. (Hall, 1987). It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent "self." Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. (Hall, 1995: 598)

The last decades have been filled with the emergence of many new different identities supported by the many technological advancements and the opening of society to those non-conventional identities. As the world is becoming smaller due to globalization, it is a lot easier for people to access information and reflect about themselves and others' experiences. Consequently, people are becoming more socially aware and demanding to be heard and represented. Black bodies have been existing since the beginning of times, but only recently have they been represented as a group full of numerous identities instead of a set of stereotypes resulting from systemic racism. In other words, black people have more space to show their true and complex identities. I believe Starr and Khalil in *THUG*, Justyce and Manny in *DM* and

Marvin and Tyler in *TJWH* fit into the post-modern subject category. They are three black teenagers who try to deviate from set ideas of what it means to be black, a teenager, a student, a girl, a boy, amongst other identities they might have within themselves. Many times, these identities might contradict each other, so there is the need to negotiate them. According to the police officers who killed Khalil, Manny and Tyler being black signifies criminality; to the gang members, being black means being angry and violent; to their teachers, being an exemplary student means getting the closest to white models. Starr, Justyce and Marvin go against these expectations and show their identities are fluid. We as readers are challenged to look at their identities through an intersectional lens. Only then are we able to understand in depth all the conditioning factors that relate their lives to the historical and social context.

hooks argues that racism affects every black people: “All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness.” (hooks, 1995: 47). The main characters in the novels seem to know this, however, when they became actual victims of police brutality, it appears that this reality came to them as a shock, since no one is ever ready to be assaulted. Consequently, their actions throughout the novels give the impression that they are trying to find a reasoning as to why they became victims and they are also trying to prove why they, black teenagers, should not be dying at the hands of racism. For this dissertation I think it is relevant to look at how the characters position themselves before the adversities they come across.

Dear Martin has two types of narrator: a third-person omniscient narrator and a first-person narrator who only appears in the letters Martin addresses to his role-model, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Justyce began a project he called "Dear Martin" where he sends letters to the late Martin Luther King Jr. sharing and complaining about his troubles as a black teenage boy. He reflects about his everyday life at a school in which he is one of the very few black students. His blackness is often put in jeopardy either by police officers or by his white classmates. Throughout the novel he seems afraid to voice his opinions about his experiences, so he seems to use the letters as a place for introspection. Although the letters are addressed to King, they have more of a journal feel since Martin Luther King passed away decades ago. Justyce started this project after being arrested because a police officer mistook his helping his white passing ex-girlfriend for him attempting to assault an unknown white girl. Despite explaining the situation multiple times, Justyce still ended up being arrested since the police officer profiled him as a black man looking for a white woman to take advantage of: “I know your kind: punks like you wander the streets of nice neighborhoods searching for prey. Just couldn’t resist the

pretty white girl who'd locked her keys in her car, could ya?" (Stone, 2017: 8). Ironically, Justyce's self-introduction to Dr. King clearly contradicts the stereotype:

Quick intro: My name is Justyce McAllister. I'm a 17-year-old high school senior and a full-scholarship student at Braselton Preparatory Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. I'm ranked fourth in my graduating class of 83. I'm the captain of the debate team, I scored a 1560 and a 34 on my SATs and ACTs respectively, and despite growing up in a "bad" area (...), I have a future ahead of me that will likely include an Ivy League education, an eventual law degree, and a career in public policy. (Stone, 2017:10)

By looking at this piece of text it is noticeable that Justyce is trying to make an impression of himself to Dr. King, but it is really to himself he is presenting a positive image of himself since in reality he is the only one reading his letters. The way he says his future looks promising despite living in a "bad area" might make one think people in his area usually do not have good academic curricula or life prospects as ambitious as Justyce's. It may even lead one to think Justyce is pulling himself out of that "bad area" group of people, and of a fate determined by a racist society.

(...) I apparently looked so menacing in my prep school hoodie, the cop who cuffed me asked for backup (...) Frankly, I'm not real sure what to feel. Never thought I'd be in this kind of situation. (...) Before The Incident last night, I hadn't really thought much about it. There's a lot of conflicting information, so it's hard to know what to believe. (...) I dunno. I've seen some pictures of Shemar Carson, and he did have kind of a thuggish appearance. In a way, I guess I thought I didn't really need to concern myself with this type of thing because compared to him, I don't come across as "threatening" you know? I don't sag my pants or wear my clothes super big. I go to a good school and have goals and vision and "a great head on my shoulders", my Mama likes to say. Yeah, I grew up in a rough area, but I know I'm a good dude, Martin. I thought if I made sure to be an outstanding member of society, I'd be exempt from the stuff THOSE black guys dealt with, you know? Really hard to swallow that I was wrong. (Stone, 2017: 10-12)

Looking at the rest of the letter, we see Justyce is indeed trying to separate himself from "THOSE black guys", including Shemar Carson, an unarmed black boy who had also been shot by a white police officer. Stereotypes have led some people to believe that whoever wears a certain clothing style or hairstyle belongs to a certain group. It appears that Justyce also has a pre-conceived idea of what a criminal looks like and he is trying to use it to justify Sherman

Carson's death. Justyce appears to be divided and ambivalent. He keeps on positioning himself away from certain people in his neighbourhood by also racially profiling those people. In my opinion this letter is a great way to show the readers that racism does not see social class or academic achievements. Although clothes may work as one's way of expression, by any means do clothes identify (at least they should not) someone as a criminal, let alone children and teenagers. However, in the eyes of racism, all black people are essentialized as only one type of person: "thuggish".

bell hooks (1995, p. 32) argues that "Systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, and racism actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating. Many of us succumb to this." In *Dear Martin*, Justyce appears to be a victim of this internalized racial profiling, since he attempts to distance himself from the targets of racial profiling. Could we say that he corresponds to the black people hooks targets as the ones who, in spite of being black, "see us as 'lacking,' as inferior when compared to whites" (hooks, 1995, p. 148)? In my opinion, I do not think Justyce falls into this category. He never shows in the novel that he feels like he or any black person is inferior to white people. His actions, however, could lead people into thinking he finds himself better than the boys in the gang. He is more privileged than them (school wise) and he did consider joining the gang, therefore, he should not be judging those kids so harshly as he could have ended up in the same position as them. These oppressive discourses have been practiced for centuries and due to them, many African-Americans have turned their backs both on their collective past of struggles and on their peers in order to protect themselves. By acknowledging their struggles, they could put themselves in danger, especially if they depend on income supplied by white bosses that may be racist (even if not openly).

As I mentioned in the first chapter, black people in the U.S.A have for long been denied their rights as citizens. It should be expected that they do not have the same privileges as the dominant white group, therefore, some black individuals deviate from anything that makes them look like the stereotypes of being black – something along the lines of what Justyce wrote in his letter – and they try to be as "white" as they can be. hooks (1995, p. 47) mentions that in a class, some black students talked about the ways they tried to appear "white" through changes of talking style, clothing and choosing white circles of friends. Thus, it seems, by this letter, that Justyce has gone through a similar journey of rejecting part of his blackness by assimilating into whatever he believes the "white culture" is in order to thrive and be socially accepted. Through this mindset, if he is accepted by the dominant group means he will not be a target of racism,

especially of racially motivated crimes. However, being arrested made Justyce realize that despite trying to be the righteous token black boy, he would still be subjected to violence.

Justyce's prejudice against other black people is not expressed at a high level any more until later in his third letter to M.L. King. He writes about a conversation he had on the phone with SJ, one of his white friends, and he recalls the night he went to a party with Manny and his white friends. One of the white friends had been wearing a Ku Klux Klan costume which earned the group a confrontation with a group of mostly black kids who were rumoured to belong to a gang. The meeting ended up in Justyce and his company being expelled from the party by the other group:

These were the dudes who used to call me White Boy because while they were shooting dice for pennies at recess, I was reading a book. I know there's no excuse for the idea that we're all the same "kind", as that cop Castillo put it, but the moment I saw that gun sticking out of dude's waistband, I felt this flare of pain around my wrists. I had this thought – be forewarned, it's an ugly one, it's assholes like Trey and his boys that have cops thinking all black dudes are up to no good. (Stone, 2017: 48-49)

Although it is true criminality amongst young black people is a problem, Justyce's reasoning can be dangerous as it shifts the blame from the guilty one to the victim. Those boys should not be in a gang terrorizing people with guns, however, Justyce got arrested because of the officer's own prejudices and a system that sees him as a threat. In addition, Justyce is forgetting the grounds as to why those kids turned to gangs. The way national institutions are organized makes it difficult for black children to get the same opportunities as white children in addition to the restraints of poverty and the ongoing police brutality in their neighbourhoods. Belonging to a gang gives them some sense of power through the means of extreme violence and makes them feel they can protect themselves against the prejudiced members of law enforcement, besides promising them the end of their poverty by dealing narcotics.

However, as one might expect, these solutions are harmful and ineffective. Quan, Manny's cousin, represents one example. He explained that while he was arrested for a "petty theft", as he put it, a white rich teenage boy managed to be released from prison for stabbing his own father multiple times using "sleepwalking" as a pretext. Seeing justice was not protecting him, as a black child, he decided he would give up and reach for gangs. He also told Justyce that since black people were already feared, he decided to follow the violent African-American stereotype (Stone, 2017:144-145). Despite not going through with it, keeping Quan's words in

mind, Justyce later tries to turn to the gang in order to make justice by his own hands due to the murder of his best friend. The media had been painting them as the “thugs” Justyce was against and Manny’s father had been fired for protesting against his son’s death. At this point, Martel’s gang seemed like the only place where his voice would be heard. Despite not teaming up with the gang, Justyce finally realized he was doing the same thing the white police officer who shot him and Manny did, and that he should not be profiling other black people just because they live in a ghetto or are rumoured to be in a gang:

The first thing to cross Jus’s mind as he steps off the bus is the irony of looking solace in the place he was anxious to get away from. As someone drives by in a brand-new Benz, he also feels a twinge of guilt over refusing to drive his new car to Martel’s house. How can he be mad at white people for profiling when he’s doing the same damn thing they do? *Lock your doors... Hide your valuables...* He even left Manny’s watch at home. (Stone, 2017:158)

In *The Hate U Give*, Starr’s uncle, Carlos, who is a black police agent goes through a process similar to Justyce’s. Initially he believes Khalil’s death was not related to racial biases and he tries to play the devil’s advocate by trying to appeal to Khalil and Starr’s assailant’s thoughts. He explains that since Khalil was a drug dealer, perhaps that could have been the motive behind Brian’s actions. However, he forgets that his colleague, whom he was on a first-name-basis with, had no way to confirm whether Khalil was a drug dealer or not (Thomas, 2017: 54-55). Moreover, drug dealing did not put the officer in danger as Khalil was not violent towards him. Later, when Starr asks him if he would also shoot Khalil, he tells her that he would only know if he had been in the agent’s position. He seemed to support this idea until Starr told him the police officer had pointed the gun at her too: “While we were waiting on help to show up, I say, my words, wobbling. He kept it on me until somebody else got there. Like I was a threat. I wasn’t the one with the gun.” (2017: 121-122). This makes Carlos reflect since he knows his niece is not a criminal and there was no reason for the police officer to point a gun at her or Khalil:

“Even if he was [a drug dealer], I knew that boy. Watched him grow with you. He was more than any bad decision he made,” he says. “I hate that I let myself fall into that mind-set of trying to rationalize his death. And at the end of the day, you don’t kill someone for opening a car door. If you do, you shouldn’t be a cop.” (...) “I dropped the ball on Khalil” (...) “I knew him, knew his family’s situation. After he stopped coming

around with you, he was out of sight and out of mind to me, and there's no excuse for that." (...) "I wouldn't have killed Khalil, by the way," Uncle Carlos says. "I don't know a lot of stuff, but I do know that."(Thomas, 2017:152-153)

Perhaps, his niece's confession made him reflect on how he was more predisposed to believe his colleague and racially profile a teenager he knew closely. This bit is also effective to make readers really consider how the U.S.A law institution has efficiently managed to make almost everyone leave black minors unprotected. Carlos seems to come to the conclusion that police officers should not abuse their power and that any agent that uses their place of power and authority to practice their own racial bias should not be in the police force. Gladly, Uncle Carlos seems to gain his focus again and works hard with Starr's father to protect DeVante, a boy who is in the same situation as Khalil was before he was killed. DeVante was struggling to pay his family's bills, so, like the generality of all gang members in the three novels, he turned to the King Lords who had a drug dealing business. DeVante realized he did not want to be part of the gang and stole some money to help his family. The King Lords were after him while Starr's family sheltered him. If Khalil had not been killed by the police officer, he could have been killed by one of the King Lords' members. Carlos and Starr's father wanted to stop DeVante from having the same destiny as Khalil. Not only should officers stop killing black kids, but the communities should also join forces to protect their children and teenagers, so they would stop turning to gangs in order to feel secure and eventually ending up murdered either by gangs or law enforcement agents.

Amongst all black teenage characters in the novels, Justyce and Manny seem to be the ones who are more biased against other black people. In the case of *The Hate U Give* and *Tyler Johnson Was Here*'s black characters I believe they seldom racial profile other black people. However, the characters' blackness is often reduced by not only their white peers but also by their black peers:

"Hey, I'm just saying. You act like you don't know nobody 'cause you go to that school." I've been hearing that for six years, ever since my parents put me in Williamson Prep. (Thomas, 2017: 8)

"You ain't changed a bit, Justyce. Still Mr. Smarty-Pants," Trey says, and then one of the other pipes up: "Y'all know he goes to that rich-ass white school out in Oak Ridge now." (Stone, 2017: 43)

“I swear you and your geeky friends are some little Crème Pies, always acting gooey and white,” (...) “Well... maybe you need to reconsider your definition of what it means to be black.” (...) “Being black doesn’t just mean repping the hood, right?”(Coles, 2018: 42)

These are some of the commentaries made by Kenya, Starr’s best friend, two boys who are in the gang Justyce considers asking help from, and Johntae, a member of a gang who bullied Marvin. Not only are black people expected to behave a certain way because they are black but there is this misconception that being a good student or being able to go to a private school is something inherently "white". In addition, these people usually think the black people who do end up doing those things are turning their backs on their black communities, they think of them as less black, especially if they were born in a ghetto setting like our main characters do. Be that as it may, I argue that those characters did not have the same opportunities as the main characters (Kenya is wealthy just because she is the daughter of the biggest drug lord in Garden Heights,). Again, black people have been neglected by the system and it has been normalized for them not to be part of an academic elite, so, whenever one of them defies the norm, they are seen as deserters. At the same time, those teenagers mentioned above usually struggle with self-esteem issues. Nic Stone explains this through her character SJ when discussing quota/affirmative action issues:

Now say you have a black guy – not Justyce, but someone else – whose single parent’s income falls beneath the poverty line. He lives in a really crummy area and goes to a public school that has fifteen-year-old textbooks and no computers. Most of the teachers are fresh out of college and leave after a year. Some psychological testing has been done at this school, and the majority of students there, this guy included, are found to suffer from low self-esteem and struggle with standardized testing because of stereotype threat – basically the guy knows people expect him to underperform, which triggers severe test anxiety that causes him to underperform. (Stone, 2017: 63)

In addition, there are some black people who manage to make it to top positions in their professional careers and sometimes tend to ignore the social and racial problems that are ongoing in black communities and even keep their distance from other black individuals. This is the case of Principal Dodson from Marvin’s high school in *TJWH*. Marvin was one of the top students in his school and when asked to write a paper about his favourite piece of art he wrote one about a popular American sitcom, "A Different World", that depicted the lives of an

African-American group. According to Marvin, the show “shows blackness in a way not many other shows do” (Coles, 2018: 37), hence the reason why he relates to it. However, the Principal believes Marvin is not a serious student since he chose a TV show as a piece of art instead of the works of canon writers like Toni Morrison and Langston Hughes. Even after arguing that black people are not monolithic and that they can have multiple sources of inspiration, the Principal still defends that boys like Marvin “don’t have a place at MIT. Or any prestigious schools in America” (Coles, 2018: 37-38). As an educator, Principal Dodson should be working on ways to lift his students’ self-esteem, especially students like Marvin who do not get the same opportunities as students like Starr and Justyce. The Principal is also ignoring the fact that shows like "A Different World" or "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" or any other “lighter” forms of art are important elements to black teenagers as they are some of the very few shows that give them characters they can identify with – since most TV shows or films are either whitewashed or black people appear as bad examples. Although Langston Hughes and Toni Morrison are authors that are important to the proliferation and the uplift of “black art”, their works should not be considered the only source of knowledge to black people. Marvin is familiar both with the canon and pop culture pieces, showing that those two worlds can be easily coupled without stripping one’s value and one’s blackness.

The more the real-life educators like Principal Dodson trample on black children’s self-esteem and intellect, the more discouraged these will feel and that is probably why some don't succeed or, in the extreme, will end up in gangs. The ones who are not that easily discouraged feel a need to prove their educators or the white elite that they can be up to par with more privileged students. It may sound like something positive, however, it often deceives black students into thinking they need to achieve the same as those other students to be successful: “She’d say I was crazy for applying to a place like that, a place that’s so out of my league, a place where black boys don’t belong (...) I don’t even know if I want to go anymore. I mean, I feel like I’ve been told all my life that MIT’s the best school if you’re serious about science, but I don’t know if that’s just a lie I’ve been forced to believe.”(Coles, 2018: 267-268)

Until some point in his life Marvin believes he will need to enter the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, one of the most prestigious research institutions in the U.S.A, in order to prove his worth as an intelligent and capable individual since not many black people are accepted as students there.

This brings me to another issue. Just as some may say that Kenya, Johntae (and the other boys who mocked Starr), Marvin and Justyce are school focused because they are envious of their friends/acquaintances' opportunities, others may say the latter also wish to fit with the black people in their neighborhoods:

“I shouldn't have come to this party. I'm not even sure I *belong* at this party. That's not on some bougie shit, either. There are some places where it's not enough to be me. Either version of me. (...) Girls wear their hair colored, curled, laid, and slayed. Got me feeling basic as hell with my ponytail.” (Thomas, 2017: 7-8).

“I hate how I feel trapped. I feel like, boxed in. I feel like I'm the mouse from *Flowers for Algernon*, like I'm destined to be this geeky black boy with no sense of direction for the rest of my life” (...) “I don't want to be a gangster”, I say. “I just want to... fit in with them. You know?” “I get you,” Ivy replies (...) “It'd be nice to fit in with the cheerleaders.” (Coles, 2018: 33-34)

Following the line that there are stereotypes that set multiple behaviours as being white and others as being black, perhaps to avoid their blackness being questioned, Starr and Marvin seem to want to be more like the majority. Possibly, Marvin wants to be courageous and freer like the boys in the gang, as if being like them would make him more of a man. Besides not being “black enough”, Starr and Marvin's best friend, Ivy, would not be feminine enough, since Starr does sports and wears her hair in a simple ponytail and since Ivy is a lesbian. They wish they could be more “feminine” and whatever that word carries socially, by having different hairstyles or being part of the cheerleading squad. Although it is important to relate to a certain group in order to feel less vulnerable. Identities fluctuate and they are not set in stone, therefore, there should be room for a multiplicity of identities, but social structures and an ingrained culture tend to fix them in stereotypes.

Because the characters' identities are constantly being questioned by friends or teachers like we saw above, they become unstable and the characters are often fearful of showing how they really are in the multiple spaces they are inserted in. In the cases of Starr, Justyce and Marvin I argue that they differentiate their identities the most when they are in an academic sphere or among white peers. Due to this, Justyce and Starr, in specific, tend to codeswitch for a better integration in their spheres, or, more importantly, to protect themselves. Codeswitching happens when one, for example, shifts from a language or language variety to another in order to fit the speaker's social conversational context. In the novels, what happens is that Starr, Justyce and Marvin

are in contact with AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) or what others might refer to as black English, and they go from it to standard American English depending on the context they are inserted in. The characters usually codeswitch because AAVE is usually seen as bad English and it is usually a factor through which black people are racially profiled as criminals. Although Justyce does not use AAVE on a daily basis, there are certain words and expressions we hear black people use the most, however, Justyce refrains himself from using them. In the following example, Justyce stops himself from saying “nigga”: “Me: What if Trey is right? What if, no matter what I do, the only thing white people will ever see me as is a nig – an “n-word”? (So glad I caught myself, Martin.) (Stone, p. 49)”. Historically this is a derogatory word used by racists to diminish black people, however, the word has been taken back by the African-American community and it was appropriated as something like “brother”. Non-black people should not use this word since they do not suffer any kind of oppression due to this word, however, Justyce, as a black boy, is more than allowed to use it. It seems, though, that Justyce tries to use as much of the American Standard English as he can, perhaps, to not be stereotyped as “thuggish”, and consequently, as a criminal when talking to his white friends and others.

Codeswitching is also easily identified in *The Hate U Give*:

For at least seven hours I don't have to talk about One-Fifteen. I don't have to think about Khalil. I just have to be normal Starr at normal Williamson and have a normal day. That means flipping the switch in my brain so I'm Williamson Starr. Williamson Starr doesn't use slang – if a rapper would say it, she doesn't say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them look cool. Slang makes her “hood”. Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she's the “angry black girl”. Williamson Starr is approachable. No stank-eyes, side-eyes, none of that. Williamson Starr is nonconfrontational. Basically, Williamson Starr doesn't give anyone a reason to call her ghetto. (Thomas, 2017: 73-74)

We know from the beginning that the way Starr acts in Garden Heights is different than the way she acts in Williamson. After she and Khalil got caught by the white police officer, the need for Starr to separate her Williamson-self and her Garden Heights-self became more urgent. She hid her involvement in the incident from her friends as a way of having at least one space where she would not have to deal with those kinds of problems. Moreover, she stopped inviting her Williamson friends to Garden Heights since it is usually more violent than her neighbourhoods (Thomas, 2017: 39). As expected, Garden Heights is not safe for children, however, the violence within black ghettos has been normalized enough for black children to

still live there. The other reason as to why she has two different ways of behaving is because she wishes not to be associated to the stereotypes of black people while at Williamson or in the presence of her white boyfriend and her Williamson friends. Logically, Starr should not have to conceal part of her identity. Unluckily, as Starr mentioned in the beginning of her story “It’s dope to be black until it’s hard to be black” (Thomas, 2017: 15).

Although these novels are works of fiction, we must not forget that they represent real life. The least that could happen to someone like Starr acting more “ghetto” in white settings would be having their self-esteem trampled on. More often than not we see non-black celebrities (and “normal” people as well) appropriating elements of “black culture” such as the slang, AAVE expressions or hairstyles like braids, dreads, twists, etc. They are usually praised by the media and the public as fashion icons and avant-gardists. However, whenever a black individual does it, they are usually reduced to “ghetto”, dirty, uneducated, naturally violent, unkempt, etc. Again, this is the least that could happen to a black person, because as seen in the books and in real life, many of these people could end up with ruined professional lives. Doc, Justyce’s debate team’s black-Jewish professor, managed to succeed despite being told that because of his cornrows he would never finish his PhD (Stone, 2017: 104), however, there have been kids expelled from schools for wearing them. And, at last, the worst that could happen – and does indeed happen – to people like Starr, Justyce or Marvin is being murdered for using those elements of “black culture”. What I mean with all this is that being “too black” or “too ghetto” can be harmful to Starr and whoever she represents in real life²⁸. Some people’s minds are still racialized and prejudiced, that is why Starr and Justyce try to run away from whatever may make them look “thuggish” or “ghetto”, since their skin color, which they cannot strip themselves off, already gives racists enough reasons to discriminate them. It is certain that Starr and Justyce should not have to conceal aspects of their lives to fit certain standards. Although it might seem like something minor, Starr kept herself in check when talking to the detectives investigating Khalil’s death incident: “Khalil didn’t have anything to do with the fight?” I raise an eyebrow “Nah”. *Dammit. Proper English.*” (Thomas, 2017: 99). This shows that, through a stereotyped lens, if “proper English” is not spoken, her credibility will be lost.

This brings me to speak about the times when the characters’ blackness was challenged by their white colleagues at school. In *Dear Martin*, as part of the group of the only six black people

²⁸ I do not mean that being “too black” or “too ghetto” should not be encouraged, however, for some people, these identities are seen as bad and because Starr is aware of that she seems to move away from them when inserted in a white sphere.

who attend the Braselton Preparatory Academy and as the only two black students who are part of the debate team, Justyce and Manny's blackness and humanhood was often challenged by Manny's group of white friends, especially Jared, to whom we will look with more attention in the following chapter. During both the debate team sessions and outside classes, the white clique often showed their ignorance of the African-American experience. For the most part they assumed equality in the U.S.A has been achieved and racism is extinct since it says so in the Constitution. According to them since equality has been achieved, then all black people are capable of succeeding, using Manny as an example. And since, according to them, racism does not exist anymore, then, Sherman Carson (the fictional black boy who had been killed by a police officer) and every other victim of police brutality has gotten the deserved punishment. Jared, in specific, argued that Sherman's death was justified since he had committed a crime before. The charge was being in the possession of Marijuana. Yet, Jared, who according to SJ had also been in the possession of marijuana, was not charged (Stone, 2017: 21-29). This situation upset Justyce as he realized how unjust it was for him to be wrongly arrested:

Sittin' there listenin' to this rich white boy brag about breaking the law after I sat in handcuffs for no reason... I can't even tell you how hard that was, Ma. It's like no matter what I do, I can't win. (Stone, 2017: 35-36)

According to a report done by the American Civil Liberties Union:

[...] while the criminal justice system casts a wide net over marijuana use and possession by Blacks, it has turned a comparatively blind eye to the same conduct occurring at the same rates in many white communities. Just as with the larger drug war, the War on Marijuana has, quite simply, served as a vehicle for police to target communities of color. (2013: 10-11)

We are presented with the U.S.A criminal justice system's double standards. While Justyce was arrested wrongly, and while there are black people being arrested or even killed for the assumption that they are in the possession of narcotics, white individuals like Jared are left unpunished. It is only natural that this reality upsets Justyce or anyone in his situation.

Every aware black person has been the "only" in an all-white setting knows that in such a position we are often called upon to lend an ear to racist narratives, to laugh at corny race jokes, to undergo various forms of racist harassment. And that self-segregation seems to be particularly intense among those black college students who were often raised in material privilege in predominantly white settings where they were socialized

to believe racism did not exist that we are all "just human beings," and then suddenly leave home and enter institutions and experience racist attacks. To a great extent they are unprepared to confront and challenge white racism [...] (hooks, 1995:155-156)

For people like Starr and Manny whose circle of school friends is mainly white, it may come as a shock when they realize their friends have been making observations that harm their existence as black individuals. Although Starr had not been entirely socialized in a white environment like Manny, she is used to tolerate Hailey's jokes in fear of being rejected. Manny also indulges in this kind of behaviour, even more than Starr as his friends had racist attitudes such as dressing up as KKK members. In the novel he seems to have the role of a mediator between Justyce and Jared. While Justyce can easily call out Jared and his friends' for their racist comments and actions, Manny tries to find a "common ground" between his friends making it seem like Justyce is "too sensitive" as his friends were "just joking". I argue that Manny and Starr often tolerated or even joked together with their white friends because it can be difficult to make your voice heard as the only black person of the group. If the white friends cannot understand the black friends' experiences, they will try to push their experiences as the only truth available. Moreover, if they share their distaste for their friends' observations, they might be accused of being the one who "makes everything about race", or they might be called "too insensitive" and "unable to take a joke". However, as Starr and Manny, especially, become more sensitive to racism and how damaging it can be, they realize that their friends' actions and comments are also targeting them. Recognizing that the people with whom you shared your childhood are actually prejudiced against you can be a hurtful experience. Starr had to let go of her childhood friend as she did not benefit Starr as a friend. Manny also seemed to be ready to let go of his friends as he ended up punching Jared for referring to him as a slave and made a complaint to the police due to that incident.

In the case of those who survived (Starr, Justyce and Marvin), they managed to stand their ground against the white peers and adults who tried to trample on their blackness. Starr, Justyce (and Manny, before dying) learnt that they do not need their white peers, nor gangs, to feel validated as black people. Marvin and Justyce learnt that they do not need to become the stereotype of a token black student in order to be considered successful black individuals. Despite the tragic ends for some of the characters, they do understand that their identities are not to be constructed according to white standards, nor should they abide by a monolithic normative black identity their educators or their peers tend to force on them. This is how, according to hooks (1995: 47) the contemporary crisis of identity in black people will be resolved.

- **Representation of white characters: how they play in the books and make use of their privilege**

As it was already noticeable, white characters play a significant part in the novels under analysis. They appear in characters such as the racist schoolmates, I introduced in the sections before; or as friends who ally with our characters; or as the police officers that killed Khalil, Manny and Tyler. This way, in this section I will look into how they are presented in the novels and how they play with the main characters.

Despite their only playing a small part in *Tyler Johnson Was Here*, all three novels present white schoolmates with racist leanings. The four characters in the three novels that are more relevant for this dissertation are Jared, S.J (DM), Hailey, Chris (THUG) especially since their friends are black and were targets of violence by white police officers. As I have mentioned, Jared and Hailey are Manny and Starr's childhood friends, while S.J. and Chris are their romantic interests. They both come from all white and wealthy families.

Hailey appears as the white friend who makes "corny racist jokes" next to her Asian and black best friends. Although her "fried chicken joke"²⁹ is questionable (Thomas, 2017: 113), it would not be the first time she would have said something similar. Since Maya is of Chinese descent, Hailey picked on a stereotype about Chinese people eating animals such as dogs and cats and asked her if she had eaten cat meat for Thanksgiving. At the time of the joke, the two non-white friends laughed because they thought they were supposed to, and most likely not to be cast out by her friend. Starr narrates "That's the problem. We let people say stuff, and they say it so much it becomes okay to them and normal for us" (Thomas, 2017: 248). Only when later remembering this episode did Starr and Maya realize they should have called out their friend for such a racist joke even if Hailey's comments should not be their responsibility. Moreover, when they finally confronted Hailey with her actions, she fails to realize why her jokes were hurtful and racist, claiming her friends are too sensitive.

As the story progresses, Hailey's actions become even more questionable. Some Williamson students decide they are going to protest against Khalil's death, however, their aim was not to protest: "Perfect timing. I so did not study for that English exam. This is, like, the first time Remy actually came up with a good idea to get out of class. I mean, it's kinda messed up that

²⁹ There is a racist stereotype that black Americans are obsessed with eating fried chicken due to a film about the founding of Ku Klux Klan titled *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) in which some characters that represent black people in a very stereotypical way feast on fried chicken. Somehow this image persisted in the collective memory of Americans and it is still used to mock African-Americans. There is also a similar stereotype related to watermelon.

we're protesting a *drug dealer's* death, but—" (Thomas, 2017: 180-181). This whole quote represents how shallow Hailey and these white teenagers are. While they could really protest against police brutality, they use the death of a black teenager to skip classes. Additionally, this also shows how important black deaths and lives are to these white teenagers.

Starr is also troubled by Hailey since she unfollowed her *Tumblr* account due to a picture of Emmett Till's slaughtered body (Thomas, 2017: 80). At first Starr thinks it is because of the shocking graphic image, however, Maya discloses that the real reason why Hailey unfollowed Starr was because she did not want to be confronted with black people's struggles as it made her uncomfortable:

"She's lying," Maya says. "That's not why she unfollowed you. She said didn't wanna see that shit on her dashboard." I figured. "That Emmett Till picture, right?" "No. All the 'black stuff,' she called it. The petitions. The Black Panther pictures. That post on those four little girls who were killed in that church. The stuff about the Marcus Garvey guy. The one about those Black Panthers who were shot by the government.(Thomas, 2017: 247)

Adding this to the quote on the section above where she excuses Khalil's death with the assumption that he was a "drug dealer" and a "gangbanger", proves that she does not take her friends' feelings into consideration nor does she seem to care about black people's lives. Although her stance does not shift significantly, nor does she own up to her mistakes, she still tells Starr she is sorry for the decision made about the police officer who killed Khalil. Although she seems to start sympathizing with Starr's feelings, there is no further development on her character.

Jared appears as the typical white teenager who believes in color-blindness and that equality among races and genders has been achieved (Stone, 2017: 22/26). Jared believes racism is no longer in practice since black people are no longer legally segregated, however, that is not the reality as Angela Davis argues: "The problem is that it is often assumed that the eradication of the legal apparatus is equivalent to the abolition of racism. But racism persists in a framework that is far more expansive, far vaster than the legal framework." (Davis, 2016: 23).

For Jared, since Manny is wealthy, black people are only materially underprivileged due to their own fault. Just the fact that he sees some minorities represented in his school leads him to believe that equality has been achieved. He fails to recognize how the U.S.A economic system gentrifies black people and denies them employment that would allow them to succeed at the

same rate as white people (Stone, 2017: 23-25). Just like Hailey, Jared cannot see beyond his white privilege and refuses to understand how he benefits from it while black kids the same age end up being arrested or dead like Sherman Carson: “SJ: I know you’d prefer to ignore this stuff because you *benefit* from it, but walking around pretending inequality doesn’t exist won’t make it disappear, Jared. You and Manny, who are equal in pretty much every way apart from race, could commit the same crime, but it’s almost guaranteed that he would receive a harsher punishment than you.” (Stone, 2017: 28)

I argue that even if they are fully aware of their privileges, Jared and his friends do nothing to change their actions since they do not suffer repercussions from the lack of privilege of other minorities. Since their behaviour is not doing them any harm and since they can take advantage of their privilege, they will keep with their behaviour such as doing blackface, supporting color-blindness, boasting about their Ku Klux Klan connections and committing crimes they know they will not be punished for:

[Jared:] “Whatever. It was the most important part, and I remember all of it. They put brown makeup on me and everything. (...)”

[Kyle:] “See, things really are equal nowadays, bro. A white kid can play a famous black dude in a play, and it’s no big deal.”

[Jared:] “Exactly! This is a color-blind society, my brethren... people are judged by the content of their character instead of the color of their skin.”

[Kyle:] “Right, dude. Like I totally don’t even see you as black, Manny!” (Stone, 2017: 32-33)

Keeping in mind his idea that equality has been totally achieved, Jared argues that affirmative action towards minorities should not exist. However, he only voices his opinion about this because he feels that he is being harmed by it. During a debate team session, he shares his opinion against affirmative action because Justyce got into Yale University and he did not, despite their school average being close. If quotas did not exist, students of color would not enter elite universities since many times these students, as S.J explains, have no access to qualified education due to how the U.S.A economic system treats black people (Stone, 2017: 62-63). If we look at Marvin, from *Tyler Johnson Was Here*, even with affirmative action he would have to work tons of times harder than Jared to get a place in an Ivy League university; even with affirmative action, the percentage of black people getting college and university education is very small; if there was no affirmative action at all, black people would be

perpetually in places of subjugation unable to change their present status. However, as we may see in the first chapter of this novel, affirmative action can also be seen as something negative for people of color as it reduces them to the numbers they have to fill instead of valuing them as talented and intelligent people. “Anyway, Jared was in Coach’s office. When I said I was quitting, he made a ‘joke’ about how I couldn’t [wait]³⁰ until *Massah* set me free. I lost it. Manny falls back on the bed. He clipped me once, but I can’t even tell you how good it felt to pound that dude.” (Stone, 2017: 109)

The episode when Manny finally reacts to his friends’ racist comments takes place when Jared made a slavery joke. Although violence should not have been Manny’s response, he reacted like any normal teenager and hit him. This ended up in Jared’s father pressing charges against Manny even if Jared’s comment was a form of violence as well. This piece of information is important since Manny had gone on a car ride with Justyce in order to distract himself from the news, only to end up murdered by a white police officer. Manny’s murder was in no way Jared’s fault. Although he could have avoided pressing charges, since Manny would suffer a lot more repercussions than Jared initially thought, he could also never imagine that Manny would end up killed, after all, within his world, Manny was privileged enough not to be racially profiled. Unfortunately, there is not much information about what happened to Jared after knowing about the news, but we do know he changed his stance about black people and their struggles. I mentioned Jared was most likely not completely aware of how racism still affects black people in the US, and Manny’s death might be proof of it. As I read it, perhaps Jared might have never imagined Manny would be a target of police brutality, because Jared argued that if a black person was arrested/killed, then, they were most likely criminals (Stone, 2017: 27) and he knew Manny was not one. Jared and people like him should not have to deal with a friend’s death in order to understand there is more outside their white privileged bubble. Perhaps the guilt Jared felt on top of feeling sad for his friends’ death made him change:

Jared turns around like he can feel Jus jabbing arrows into the back of his head. The moment they see each other (though Jared wouldn’t know because of Justyce’s sunglasses), fury wraps around Jus so tightly, he almost can’t breathe. Even from a distance, Jus can tell Jared’s eyes are haunted. Like the floor has opened up beneath him and there’s no bottom to his agony. Jus recognizes the expression because he’s feeling the same way. It makes him want to burn the world down. (Stone, 2017: 127)

³⁰ I added ‘wait’ because the book’s author and the editors might have skipped it.

After the cropped picture of Justyce dressed as “thug” came out, Jared and his father made sure the whole picture was disclosed since one of Jared’s friends was dressed up as a member of the Ku Klux Klan and Jared considered the picture was his fault, because the costumes were his idea. Some, like Justyce and Sarah Jean, could doubt his actions due to his past, however, Doc explains that Jared “doesn’t want his friend’s name dragged through the mud any more than” they do (Stone, 2017: 152-153). We may consider Jared’s attitude as the first step towards a potential ally in the fight for African-American rights. Jared was faced with the actual proof that his friend was not as privileged as he thought, therefore, everything he believed thus far was no longer valid to him. That is why he decided to embark on an African-American Studies/Civil Rights Law academic journey. In real life, it is not necessary to go to such extent, however, it is encouraged for people like Jared to listen to their friends and learn about their experiences even if they cannot relate to them. Reading books like *THUG*, *Dear Martin* and *TJWH* could be a start in understanding one’s own privilege. Angie Thomas mentioned in an interview with @booksandaquills’ YouTube channel owner that she has received messages from children of white supremacists who finally realized how detrimental their actions could be to other people.

Since the only relevant white characters in *Tyler Johnson Was Here* are the police officers and other adults, there is not much information about how Marvin’s white schoolmates interact with him, apart from the one white boy who wants to organize a demonstration for the police officer who shot Tyler. However, in *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* there are two figures that are crucial in the lives of Starr and Justyce: Chris and Sarah Jane (SJ). They appear as their romantic interests but, most importantly, as the white characters who respect their friends’ existence and who either have unlearned or are unlearning racism.

Chris is introduced as Starr’s boyfriend. He is a white teenage boy and he attends the same school as Starr. As Starr keeps some of her Garden Heights life outside Williamson, there are certain things Chris is not aware of such, as her involvement in the shooting incident. Thus, he cannot understand why sometimes Starr is so hostile towards him. Since Starr has such unpleasant reactions from her friend Hailey, it is normal for her to fear that Chris will not understand her racial issues. To some extent, Starr is right. Chris still hosts a few conceptions about black people that are clearly based on stereotypes, perhaps due to his upbringing in an affluent white setting, lacking a varied range of black representation. In the excerpts bellow, he mentions certain actions as being a “black thing” showing how stereotypes still cloud his mind:

“Is this one of those black things I don’t understand?” “Okay, babe, real talk? If you

were somebody else I'd side-eye the shit out of you for calling it that." "Calling it what? A black thing?" "Yeah." "But isn't it what it is?" "Not really," I say. "It's not like this kinda stuff is exclusive to black people, you know? The reasoning may be different, but that's about it. Your parents don't have a problem with us dating?" "I wouldn't call it a problem," Chris says, "but we did talk about it." "So it's not just a black thing then, huh?" "Point made.(Thomas, 2017: 228-229)

"Okay. Why do some black people give their kids odd names? I mean, look at you guys' names. They're not normal." "My name normal," DeVante says, all puffed-up sounding. "I don't know what you talking about." (...) "Anyway, Chris," Seven says, "DeVante's got a point. What makes his name or our names less normal than yours? Who or what defines 'normal' to you? If my pops were here, he'd say you've fallen into the trap of white standard."(Thomas, 2017: 395-296)

These excerpts show how white standards have been represented to the extent of becoming the norm, pushing everything else to the margins. The first excerpt regards an episode where Chris became the center of attention since he was Starr's "white boyfriend". Since Chris is so used to being on the side of the norm, when he finally experiences something similar to being the "other", he finds it strange. The second piece shows how the U.S.A society has put Eurocentric standards at the core, invalidating other existing references like the African ones.

On one side, Starr is very sensitive about her relationship with Chris because they are an interracial couple (Thomas, 2017: 85). This means that they are the target of many unwanted comments, especially racist ones about her. Apart from their racial differences, they are also from different social classes. Thus, this seems to be an issue that blows Starr's self-esteem:

"I'm white?" he says, like he's just hearing that for the first time. "What the fuck's that got to do with anything?" "Everything! You're white, I'm black. You're rich. I'm not." "That doesn't matter!" he says. "I don't care about that kinda stuff, Starr. I care about you." "That kinda stuff is part of me" "Okay, and ...? It's no big deal..." (...) "So like I said, you don't understand. Do you?" (...) "No. I guess I don't," he says. Another round of silence. Chris puts his hands in his pockets. "Maybe you can help me understand? I don't know." (Thomas, 2017: 160-161)

On the other side, Chris seems to be unaware of how harmful such comments can be to his girlfriend's self-esteem as a black girl. I would not go to the extent Chris is racist or a colorblindness supporter, however, due to his upbringing and perhaps the lack of exposure to

black representation outside his affluent all white environment, he is completely unaware of how his whiteness benefits him. He most likely never had to deal with any kind of discrimination due to his skin color or his social status. Furthermore, it is presumable that he never had to fight for rights since he was born with them. Fortunately, Chris is willing to learn and listen to his girlfriend's perspective in order to recognize that as a white boy he holds more privileges than Starr does as a black girl. He finally realizes it after the announcement that the police officer who killed Khalil was acquitted from his crimes. Black people in Garden Heights were dissatisfied with the situation's come out and they wanted to riot. Chris did not see the point in it as he still relied on police officers to set the order. After Starr explains that black people cannot rely on law enforcement agents like he does as a white boy, he understands that rioting is the only thing left his girlfriend and his friends can do to make their voices be heard, therefore he joins them, becoming an ally (Thomas, 2017: 384-387).

Sarah Jean is first presented as one of Justyce's close friends and also one of his colleagues at the debate team. She becomes Justyce's romantic interest as both of them come closer. Although she is of Jewish descent, she is considered to be white by the majority of people. I dare to say she is the one person who pushes Justyce to finally make his voice heard. She is the perfect example of a white person who is aware of the privilege she holds by being white in the U.S.A. She uses her whiteness to call out her white colleagues for their racist ideas. During the debate team sessions, Sarah Jean is the one who counteracts Jared most times whenever he exposes his observations against black people, while Justyce and Manny are still in their non-confrontational phase:

“SJ: You get away with it because you're white, asshole. (...)

Jared: You looked in a mirror lately SJ? You're just as white as I am.

SJ: Yeah, and I recognize that and how it benefits me. (...)

SJ: Whatever, Jared. Bottom line, nobody sees *us* and automatically assumes we're up to no good.

Everyone: [...]

SJ: We'll never been seen as criminals before we're seen as people.” (Stone, 2017: 29)

Sarah Jean often puts situations in perspective which is a great strategy to show how she teaches her friends and the readers, regardless of their racial background, about white privilege and why white people should acknowledge it and use it to fight white supremacy. Yet, some could say

Sarah Jean is speaking for Justyce and she addresses it herself: “SJ: I want to apologize. Me: For what? SJ: For stepping out of line in class a while back. Me: ... SJ: I know it’s been over a month, but after talking to you tonight... Well, it wasn’t my place to speak for you. I’m really, really sorry.” (Stone, p. 50). Through this quote, we can see that Sarah Jean does not want to replace black people on the fight for equal rights, instead, she wants to genuinely help and support Justyce.

After Khalil and Manny’s deaths, Starr and Justyce became apprehensive about Chris and Sarah Jean as they were as white as the police officers who had killed their best friends. White people’s fear towards black people is encouraged by the racist discourses that deem black people as dangerous (hooks, 1995: 268). Although Starr and Justyce’s fear and discrimination are somewhat justified by white supremacy and a whole history of white people abusing black people, their fear is still considerably irrational, as their friends are not responsible for their other friends’ deaths. Just as they do not want to be essentialized as violent and evil, they should not essentialize their friends either. Starr and Justyce’s brief apprehension to their romantic interests is also fed by their respective families, mainly Starr’s father and Justyce’s mother who are against their children’s relationships with white people, not out of reverse discrimination, but for fear that their children are turning their backs on their communities and also out of fear that other white people will mistreat them:

“Whether you believe it or not, she brings out the best in me. When I’m with her, I *want* to overcome everything”. “I get what you’re saying son, but there are plenty of brilliant black women who can do the same”(Stone, 2017: 182)

“You got a problem with black boys?” “No. I’ve had black boyfriends.” (...) “Since you wanna ask me questions, do you have a problem with white people?” “Not really.” “*Not really?*” “Ay, I’m being honest. My thing is, girls usually date boys who are like their daddies, and I ain’t gon’ lie, when I saw that white – Chris,” he corrects, and I smile. “I got worried. Thought I turned you against black men or didn’t set a good example of a black man. I couldn’t handle that.” (Thomas, 2017: 265-267)

According to colorism (fuelled by racism) the lighter (or the closer to white) one is, the more intelligent, prettier, better one is, therefore, people in the darker side of the spectrum are often deemed as inferior. Black people, especially women, are often victims of colorism because other black people date and marry white or light-skinned significant others (hooks, 1995: 120). However, this does not seem either Justyce or Starr’s case. They both acknowledge that they are ethnically or racially different from their significant others but that is not the reason for their

interest.

Although white police brutality is one of the main reasons why *THUG*, *DM* and *TJWH* were written, police officers as characters do not deserve as much attention as the main characters. Yet, one obvious thing is that they do not differ from novel to novel, nor do they differ from the real-life police officers who killed and are killing black teenagers in the U.S.A. They all stopped their targets based on racial profiling. They assumed that Starr and Khalil, Justyce and Manny, and Marvin were threats to their lives due to the targets' skin color, the neighborhood they were in, the music they were listening to, the clothes they were wearing. Based on their prejudice fuelled by the U.S.A history of systemic racism, the three police officers used unnecessary force and even broke the law in order to assert their power (the agent who shot Justyce and Manny was off duty). During Starr's, Justyce's and Marvin's questionings at the police stations, police officers often lead their interrogatories in order to find any fault in the victims' actions instead of in their colleagues' behaviour. This way they could paint the victims as disobedient instead of having to deal with a situation in which law enforcers broke the law. After their actions became known, the public opinion either condemned the agents for using police brutality unnecessarily, or they were deemed as heroes by their family and other whites usually in news outlets. Instead of acknowledging the agents' wrongdoings, the media in the novels (and in real life) prefer to keep fuelling the idea that black teenagers are inherently bad and that those officers are only doing their jobs as enforcers of the law. Moreover, the media influences the public into believing that the negative stereotypes about teenagers are to be taken seriously and only showing the agents' point of view. This makes it difficult for the victims' families and witnesses of the crimes to help prove their innocence. However, the novels try to counteract that by telling the victims' life story and bringing forth their complexity as human beings, as well as by showing the police officers in these novels acting by their prejudices and not by the law. Overall, the novels do not seem to try and promote the white/black dichotomy, instead, they show white characters who are indeed highly racist and prejudiced, but they also show white characters who recognize their privileged space and use it to act as an ally for their black peers.

- **Comparison: stories, points of view, endings**

The novels are pretty similar in the choice of themes, yet, they still diverge in some respects. Although the main characters all come from similar backgrounds, Justyce and Starr are more privileged than Marvin when it comes to schooling, housing and material possessions. The same applies to the victims, except Manny who is the only one out of the three that did not have the need to deal drugs or turn to gangs, since his family is wealthy. I believe it is also important

how drug dealing is shown as a result of the lack of protection of black children and the need to survive, instead of just wanting to be wealthy without “working honestly”.

In comparison to Starr or Marvin, Justyce is the one who had to go through a bigger process of unlearning internalized racism and understanding that the problem with him being arrested and his friend being killed by a police officer has to do with centuries of systemic racism and not the way he and black people act or present themselves. Starr and Marvin have more contact with their homes and families than Justyce does, so, perhaps, they have a better notion of the struggles within black ghettos, whereas Justyce spends most of his time at the boarding school in which the circle of people surrounding him is more of a white middle class. Nonetheless, all three characters find there is no right definition of what it means to be black. Starr and Justyce learn that they do not need to conceal their black identities in order to fit into their group of white friends, nor do they need to downgrade themselves to make their white friends more comfortable with their blackness. Marvin learns he does not need to prove to his professors, his black friends, the white university committees and the world in general that he is worthy by trying to excel at everything in life. Most of all, our three protagonists learn that they have a voice to speak against racism and injustice in their lives.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the fact that the novels make sure readers know the fight for black lives is not an anti-white movement nor an anti-police force movement, instead they are only trying to raise awareness to the fact that systemic racism is killing too many people and that people have the power to help and dismantle it. Although not all white characters understand why they should fight for equality, some of them, like Chris in *THUG* and SJ (and Jared in the end) in *DM*, ended up joining their black peers and hold their white equals for their actions.

The Hate U Give and *Tyler Johnson Was Here* both include people from multiple ethnic backgrounds, such as Chinese and Colombian respectively (Maya and Carlos), *Dear Martin* includes Jewish people like SJ and Justyce’s professor, Doc. Only *TJWH* includes an LGBT character. On the one hand, the novels are a bit lacking in inclusion, on the other hand, the focus does not seem to be on issues such as homophobia, nor should we expect the authors to speak more about experiences they did not go through and never will, such as the struggle of Asian-Americans and Latinx.

When it comes to the storylines, *The Hate U Give* is the only novel in which the fatal confrontation between the characters happens at the beginning, meaning that we only get to know Khalil for a short while. Through the rest of book, we have to rely on Starr’s narration

which can be less credible as she only shows her perspective on the story. *Dear Martin* and *Tyler Johnson Was Here* offer us more information about the victims as the narrators are heterodiegetic and less biased. The endings of the books are also different when it comes to the destiny of the police officers. Although all questionings and trials in the three novels were conducted in order to excuse the police officer characters like the real-life trials, they all end differently. In *The Hate U Give* the police officer is acquitted of his crimes, just like the trials of the assailants of Emmett Till, Michael Brown and every other murdered black child so far. In *Dear Martin*, there was to be a second trial, however, the police officer ended up being murdered in his cell while waiting to go to court. It is not clear who did it, but in the novel it is mentioned the ex-officer was receiving death threats, probably from other black inmates (Stone, 2017: 198). Some might think justice was done since that officer could not racially profile any more people any longer, but, murdering a murder suspect (or any human being) is not only illegal but it also interferes with the trial process. Moreover, murdering racist police officers may reinforce racial hate and will certainly not stop others from racially profiling and killing more black teenagers. In *Tyler Johnson Was Here* we do not get to read about the trial. The open ending may give readers hope that someday people will be held accountable for this type of actions.

CONCLUSION

African-American people have gone through many hardships throughout the whole history of the United States of America, from slavery to segregation and racial profiling which sometimes leads to the unjust killing of not only adults, but also children. As we have seen, history has provided conditions for whites to create a system that benefits them and subjugates racial/ethnic minorities through violent methods. Racist discourses about black people were also created in order to justify their subjugation to whites. As these discourses were repeated over the centuries, they became ingrained in the nation's collective memory and created images of black people as inferior. In addition, they also blocked black people from citizenship and the benefits that come from it, making black people feel like outsiders in a country that gave birth to them. These discourses and actions taken by the U.S.A white supremacist system were and still are believed by many and they are also what makes racism systemic instead of it being solely individual opinions. Through demonstrations or movements like the Civil Rights Movements or the *Black Lives Matter* Movement, people are trying and sometimes succeeding in reclaiming the rights they should have never been stripped of. Asking for equality does not mean whites will lose the rights they awarded themselves in the beginning of the country's history, it only means that black people and other minorities will benefit from them as well. Unfortunately, due to the U.S.A political and social situation at the moment the journey to equality is going slower than it should, or even regressing. There are intentions of building a wall and the release of ban laws to keep immigrants from entering the country; there are too many mass shootings due to the lack of gun control and people of color, mostly blacks, are still dying at the hands of white supremacists (who end up being acquitted of their crimes). Children and teenagers like Emmett Till (14) in the 50s, Michael Brown (18), Tamir Rice (12) and Jazmine Barnes (7) in this decade, are still being killed due to racial hatred. For white supremacy to end, for equality to exist and for young people to stop dying at the hands of racists, people of color need to acknowledge that they are not inferior and that they got a voice they can use; and white people need to understand their own privileges in order to help their fellow citizens' fight for their rights. Right now, the goal for equality seems very utopian but perhaps it can be achieved.

As of now, since African-Americans are still targets of racism and white supremacy, there is still the need to speak against it, therefore, writers are still using literature as a way of protesting and reclaiming their rights. Right now, they are at a point where they can produce their own images of themselves instead of relying on white people's representations. I would not say that

we are in a post-blackness era because African-Americans cannot strip themselves from race³¹ nor racism, however, their art does not have to be focused solely on race.

In this dissertation, the books I analysed — *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone and *Tyler Johnson Was Here* by Jay Coles — are not part of the literary canon. However I believe they are still a part of the African-American protest tradition and they can be as political as canonical works despite the fact that aesthetic qualities are not the focus of these authors' investment. Black readers, especially young people, who come across these novels may improve their self-esteem and find stories about people who look like them, live like them, talk like them and act like them. Representation is highly important in these books since until recently the majority of characters were white. Since readers are represented in these books, they may find a deeper understanding of what they must go through in their lives and ponder solutions or ways of dealing with their real-life problems that were not offered to them before. The novels do a great job in showing what the media outlets usually do not show regarding the motivations behind black youth's crimes. It is true that some black teenagers turn to drug dealing and it is their choice to do so, but it is also partially caused by a system that casts black people aside and blocks them from improving their life conditions. The novels also show that some of the presumptions about black teenagers are just presumptions and the result of preconceived ideas that need to be challenged and deconstructed. It is also shown, as I already mentioned, that the fight for equality is not solely made of minorities nor is it a fight against white people. There are white individuals that are still blinded by the racism existing in society but there are also individuals who are willing to learn and listen to their black peers. This brings me to how the three books, through Starr, Justyce and Marvin, remind not only young readers but also adults who might read the books that they have a voice to speak up and fight for their rights.

Similarly to the novels I analysed I also recommend *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes not only calls out for the violence against black and latinx kids, but it is also didactic as it teaches, as lightly as possible, about Emmett Till and how there is a history of violence in the United States. *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely shows the points of view of a black and a white teenagers regarding police brutality and it might be a start for young readers to develop their sense of activism. *On The Come Up* (2019) by Angie Thomas is the authors' second novel and she keeps on representing black girls who live in ghettos through the voice of

³¹ Although some may want use ethnicity instead of racism as I have shown in this dissertation and as reality happens, people of color are still highly affected by race therefore right now we should still talk about race as a social construct.

an aspiring rapper who deals with police violence and nearby drug dealing. Since African-Americans are speaking up louder and louder, perhaps, we can see the day where books like these manage to stay in the memory of future generations and revolutionize some part of the world.

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