

# The Battle Against Racial Discrimination in America: Peaceful Protests

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i književnosti i  
pedagogije

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**Borba protiv rasne diskriminacije u Americi: mirni protesti**

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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2019.

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Jadranka Zlomislić, Ph.D. Assistant Professor

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## **Abstract**

The United States was created upon the claim that all men are created equal but when one takes a closer look into American history, it becomes evident that those who were not of the white race suffered discrimination, exploitation and deprivation of basic human and civil rights. Despite the hardships and hatred directed at them, the African Americans chose to gain equality and overcome the prejudices and discrimination by fighting violence using chiefly non-violent methods. The aim of the paper is to examine the peaceful protests that occurred as a part of the battle against racial discrimination in America in the 1950s and 1960s to get an insight into the origin of racial discrimination and the struggles of African Americans to overcome it. The social position of African Americans formed through slavery and it remained unfavourable after the abolition of slavery in the form of Jim Crow Laws. The battle against racial discrimination reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s at which time a series of peaceful protests appeared. The paper highlights the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Sit-ins, Freedom Rides and the March on Washington as well as the two of the most prominent figures of the period, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., who contributed significantly to the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, the final section presents the poetry from the period that reflects the reality of the period and serves as an expression of protest through art.

**Keywords:** African Americans, racial discrimination, segregation, peaceful protests, civil rights



## **Introduction**

From their first arrival to America, African Americans were in an unfavourable position, suffering dehumanizing treatment and discrimination. Despite the hardship and hatred aimed at them, the African Americans chose to achieve equality and overcome the prejudices and discrimination by fighting violence using chiefly non-violent methods. This paper aims to examine the peaceful protests in the battle against racial discrimination in America in the 1950s and 1960s by taking a look at the origins of racial discrimination and the struggle of the African Americans to overcome the obstacles and challenges.

The first chapter gives an overview of the social and historical context in which the relationship between the black and white community of America was established. It examines the period from the first arrival of African Americans to the New World until the 1950s.

The second chapter presents peaceful protest as a tool for creating change and expressing dissatisfaction. The concept of peaceful protests is explained as well as how they were used in the battle against racial discrimination. The chapter focuses on the major non-violent events that contributed to the Civil Rights Movement.

The final chapter examines the poetry which reflects the issues of oppression and injustice that the African Americans were facing and also serve as a means of peaceful protest. The poems analysed include: "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall, "Backlash Blues" by Langston Hughes and "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou.

## **1. The Socio-historical Context of Racial Discrimination**

To understand the reasons the African Americans had for protesting during the 1950s and 1960s, one must understand their social position. The key to understanding their social position is to look into American history because it offers an insight into the reason African Americans were brought to America, what their position in the society was back then and how their social position changed through the centuries.

### **1.1 Slavery and Abolition**

The first African Americans did not come willingly to America. They were imported as a free labour force to the New World by the colonists because “slavery in the United States was part of a long established system of labour exploitation” on which the southern economy was based (R. Davis 11). According to Dehsen, slavery is an institution in which one person owns the other, and as the owner, they can force the other person to work (348). With time, claims that those of black skin were an inferior species emerged and “all African-Americans were assumed by most whites to be inferior and better off as slaves” (R. Davis 27). It is possible that this belief was constructed in order to justify the cruel behaviour the owners displayed towards slaves:

Accepted methods of punishment for slaves included verbal rebukes, a few “cuts” with a stick or riding whip, kicks to the body, boxing of ears, confinement in corn cribs or tool sheds, branding on the flesh of the hand or head with a hot iron applied for 20 seconds, and mutilation of the body by clipping the ears, breaking legs, severing fingers, and slitting tongues. (R. Davis 20)

Such inhuman behaviour served as a way to keep the slaves in line, to break their spirit and assure their obedience and willingness to work.

However, there were some people who recognized the cruelty and unfairness of this kind of treatment and abolitionism, “a political and social movement aimed at eliminating slavery” (Dehsen 1), was born. Abolitionism was mostly present in the North. One of the prominent names of the movement was Abraham Lincoln (Dehsen 2) who became the president in 1860 (Zinn 184). Because of Lincoln’s abolitionist views, the South, whose economy, as was mentioned previously, was based on the labour of slaves, declared secession and the Civil War between the South and North started. With the Northern victory, what the

Southerners feared came true and during Lincoln's presidency slavery was abolished and African Americans' rights were defined:

The 13th Amendment (1865) provided for the abolition of slavery. The 14th Amendment (1868) made all native-born persons, including former slaves, citizens and guaranteed due process and equal protection of the law to all. The 15th Amendment stipulated that all citizens have the right to vote regardless of "race, colour or previous condition of servitude." (Dehsen 110)

Abolition of slavery may have seemed like an end to the troubles of African Americans, but their battle for freedom was just starting. Beliefs about their inferiority became deep-rooted, especially in the South. In the upcoming decades, the difference between the North and the South in the attitudes towards African Americans became more and more pronounced, and the South became the battle ground for racial equality.

## **1.2 Jim Crow Laws and Segregation**

Amendments issued during Lincoln's presidency did assure certain rights for African Americans but did not make them equal to the white population. Black people were still seen as inferior and some white people believed that skin colour made African Americans different beyond just their physical looks. This belief became embodied in the Jim Crow Laws.

First, there were Black codes as "new laws that seriously restricted the movement and rights of the former slaves, and eventually all African Americans. Black Codes attempted to keep African Americans under the control of white landowners, to deny them suffrage, and to ensure that they remained socially subordinate to whites" (Brown and Stentiford 18). The codes were created in the South as a way to cope with the defeat the South suffered in the Civil War that resulted in the abolition of slavery. The restricting laws spread throughout the South and "by 1910, every former Confederate state had enacted laws restricting African American political rights, social movement, and economic development" (Brown and Stentiford 19). These laws soon became known under the name Jim Crow Laws and they included:

Segregated waiting rooms in professional offices...as well as water fountains, restrooms, building entrances, elevators, cemeteries, even amusement-park cashier windows. Laws forbade African Americans from living in white neighbourhoods. Segregation was enforced for public pools, phone booths, hospitals, asylums, jails and

residential homes for the elderly and handicapped...Marriage and cohabitation between whites and blacks was strictly forbidden in most southern states. (“Jim Crow Laws”)

Such laws were justified under the phrase “separate but equal,” which meant that all separate services were the same in quality and that black and white people were each other’s equals, just separated. In 1896 “the United States Supreme Court established the ‘Separate but Equal Doctrine,’ holding that legal racial segregation does not violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment” (“Jim Crow Era”).

But this system did not treat all races equally and was used for decades in order to maintain a sense of superiority of the white race dating back to the days of slavery. “Jim Crow became a self-perpetuating system for several decades” (Brown and Stentiford 19). It also played a significant role in the creation and reinforcement of existing stereotypes “that had once served to justify the enslavement of blacks” (Harris 5) and led to discriminatory behaviour and the belief in white supremacy.



Fig 1. A sign in Montgomery, Alabama, showing separate drinking fountains for blacks and whites (“Jim Crow Laws.”*African American Civil Rights Movement*, <http://www.african-american-civil-rights.org/jim-crow-laws/>. Accessed 27 June 2019.)

### **1.3 The 1950s and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Movement**

With the rise of Jim Crow laws, the dissatisfaction of African Americans, who were discriminated on a daily basis because of their colour, rose too. The segregation system was unfair, at times cruel and it went against the promise that all men were created equal that was embedded in the very foundation upon which America was built. In the years after World War II, America entered an era of political and social change and as a part of this era, the Civil Rights Movement began.

The first major event that preceded the beginning of the movement was when “in 1954, in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the Supreme Court declared that ‘separate educational facilities’ for black children were ‘inherently unequal’” (“The 1950”). This verdict came to be with the assistance of the NAACP “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [that] was established in 1909 and is America’s oldest and largest civil rights organisation” which will continue to play a significant role in events that will take place during the Civil Rights Movement (“NAACP”). The verdict was considered an enormous victory in the battle against racial segregation and it helped set off many of the events that occurred afterwards. It did not mark the end of Jim Crow laws, but it was the beginning of the end and “[it] was the first nail in Jim Crow’s coffin” (“1950s”).

There were still many obstacles standing in the way of racial equality. As a reaction to the verdict “more than 100 Southern congressmen ...signed a ‘Southern Manifesto’ declaring that they would do all they could to defend segregation” (“1950s”). In spite of this manifesto and similar negative and at times violent reactions from the white population of the South, antisegregationists continued with their efforts and the Civil Rights Movement in the upcoming years grew stronger and stronger.

## 2. Peaceful Protests as Nonviolent Resistance to Injustice

After World War II, America went through significant social and political changes. In light of these changes, the change of the social position of African Americans in American society was inevitable. However, this change could not be achieved without concrete action. Those fighting against racial discrimination decided that these actions should not be violent, in other words, they decided to go with peaceful protests to procure change and achieve equality. Peaceful protests were a powerful response to the segregation and discrimination that often included brutal acts like beating and lynching. Such a way of thinking and non-violent acts made an impact that heavily influenced the ongoing affairs: “acts of ‘nonviolent resistance’ ... helped shape the civil rights movement of the next decade” (“1950”).

Roots of peaceful protesting can be seen in Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience in which he asserts that if you see something you do not agree with, you should not participate in it. In other words, you should disobey because if you do not, you are supporting the system with which you disagree (13). This method of peaceful protesting also has roots in Gandhi’s actions. He was among the first people who used this method to fight a political system. “Gandhi’s interpretation of civil disobedience and his methods in opposing discrimination in both South Africa and within India had a profound effect on later civil rights leaders within the United States” (Beauchamp 319).

The influence of what both Gandhi and Thoreau were advocating for is visible in the actions that will be undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s as part of the battle against racial discrimination. The forms of peaceful protesting that took place during this period include boycotts, sit-ins and marches. The paper offers an overview of the major events from each type of peaceful protest that contributed significantly to the Civil Rights Movement in the chronological order of their occurrence as well as the people who played significant roles in the events. Firstly, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, together with the actions of Rosa Parks, served as a catalyst for the boycott that played a significant role in the desegregation of public spaces. With time nonviolent resistance grew stronger and “culminated in the student sit-ins and the Freedom Rides of 1960- 1961” (Meier 441). Furthermore, the March on Washington, led by leaders of the Civil Rights Movement among which was Martin Luther King Jr, the most significant organiser and actor of the event, appeared as a milestone in the battle for civil rights.

## 2.1. The Montgomery Bus Boycott

As previously mentioned, Rosa Parks' name emerges as one of the most prominent names connected to the Civil Rights Movement. This is because her action, when she "refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama" (Wallach 157), caused a backlash against the segregation of the black community that later led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and significant changes concerning desegregation.

According to a HISTORY article, on a December day, in 1955, Rosa Parks, an African-American seamstress, refused to comply with the bus driver's request to vacate her seat in the "colored section" when the white seats in the bus were all occupied ("Montgomery Bus Boycott"). Not only was segregation in public places unfair, but the event itself undermined the previously mentioned "separate but equal" doctrine. It emphasized the view of the white people that black people were inferior, hence they should give up their seat for the benefit of a white person. What Parks did was an example of civil disobedience and a form of a peaceful protest, where she, using nonviolent resistance, made it clear that she was "weary of the continual burden of racial discrimination" (Wallach 158). She persisted with her decision until she was arrested ("Montgomery Bus Boycott"). Her deed was not the first action of this kind, but it was one of the first that had such a huge impact in this period of the fight against racial discrimination in the United States.

Parks already had a history of fighting for civil rights because as Berg asserts, she was "a high-ranked member of the local NAACP chapter" (qtd. in Karatzas 46). Nonviolent resistance entails a lot of moral and emotional strength, so it is worth mentioning that before she took a stand in the Montgomery Bus, she "received training in nonviolent resistance at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee" (Wallach 157).

Bond-Nelms argues that in the days after Rosa Parks' arrest, the Montgomery Bus Boycott broke out as a response to the injustice she suffered. The Bus Boycott meant that African Americans decided not to use public transport anymore but would instead walk or get rides ("Boycotts, Movements and Marches"). The black population of Montgomery was determined, but their determination was challenged, and their efforts were met with violence. A great number of people was still not prepared to accept African Americans as equals and end segregation so "white segregationists turned to violence. Bombs exploded in four Negro churches. A shotgun blast was fired through the front door of the home of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the twenty-seven-year-old Atlanta-born minister who was one of the leaders of the

boycott” (Zinn 442) and many other violent means were used in response to the acts of peaceful protests of African American and their white supporters. This, however, did not stop the boycotters and “the boycott continued for 381 days” (“Boycotts, Movements and Marches”). The boycotters did not succumb to violence and they continued in a peaceful manner.

Finally, after more than a year of boycotting, “the Supreme Court declared segregated seating on public transportation unconstitutional in 1956” (Wallach 157). This marked a second big win in the fight for civil rights and desegregation of public facilities. The first being, the already mentioned, desegregation of schools that was a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* verdict. Both events served as motivation for such efforts to continue, but there was still a long way to go before the wanted results were achieved.

## **2.2. Sit-ins**

In the wave of peaceful protesting used for achieving civil rights, the sit-ins emerged as one of the most prominent methods together with boycotts and marches. According to Cuthbert-Kerr, the sit-ins were also used before, but they just did not spread so fast and did not achieve such popularity and success as they did in the 1950s and 1960s. The key event responsible for popularizing the sit-ins was the Greensboro sit-in, North Carolina in 1960 (732) when “four African American college students walked up to a whites-only lunch counter at the local WOOLWORTH'S store ...and asked for coffee. When service was refused, the students sat patiently. Despite threats and intimidation, the students sat quietly and waited to be served” (“54d. The Sit-In Movement”).

Once again, segregation policies concerning public places were attacked. Rather than suffer financial losses, the businesses involved, in this case restaurants, were willing to change their discriminatory policies. As Cuthbert-Kerr notes, “as it became clear that the protests were organised, disciplined, and persistent, store owners became increasingly concerned that sales would be lost” (734). Also “the fact that most department stores accepted their money everywhere else in the store, but then refused to let African American customers sit and eat at the lunch counter made this particular form of racism especially offensive” (Schmidt). Nevertheless, the non-violent protest undertaken by the students were met with dissatisfaction from the white population which they displayed using both verbal and physical attacks. For example, the protesters “would be pelted with food or ketchup.



Angry onlookers tried to provoke fights that never came. In the event of a physical attack, the student would curl up into a ball on the floor and take the punishment” (“54d. The Sit-In Movement”). The philosophy of the protestors was non-violence and despite everything they suffered during the sit-in they did not fight back since “any violent reprisal would undermine the spirit of the sit-in” (“54d. The Sit-In Movement”).

Despite the difficulties met on the first day, according to Cuthbert-Kerr, the group returned in greater numbers and “by the end of the first week of sit-ins, over 400 students were participating in the sit-ins in Greensboro” (733). This angered antisegregationists, but there was little they could do because the sit-ins spread throughout the South as “Greensboro...inspired college students in other North Carolina cities to start their own sit-ins” (Schmidt). It is important to mention that as the movement of sit-ins grew, not all participants were applying the non-violent philosophy because, according to Schmidt, the movement also attracted African Americans who were not familiar with the methods of nonviolence and civil disobedience, and therefore, the “nonviolence that defined the first wave of protests remained evident in many locations, but not everywhere” (Schmidt). Thus, although African Americans for the most part protected using non-violent means there were recorded instances of violence on the part of African Americans.

The Greensboro sit-in differed from the other protests because “it was clear that this was the students’ protest and that it was not being orchestrated by far-away civil rights strategists or radical ideologues,” which played a significant role in the spread of the sit-ins and led to the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (Schmidt). It showed that young people too started to understand how deep-rooted Jim Crow laws were and that change was necessary. Cuthbert-Kerr notes that the SNCC brought together many of the young activists involved in the sit-in movement (734). SNCC together with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) became “the grassroots organisers of future sit-ins at lunch counters, wade-ins at segregated swimming pools, and pray-ins at white-only churches” (“54d. The Sit-In Movement”).

As already mentioned, protests, which first appeared in Greensboro, spread quickly and according to Cuthbert-Kerr, students were being arrested for trespassing. This was initiated by the owners who were worried about their profits. However, students who participated were prepared by the organisers that this might happen and knew that several arrests had already taken place. Soon, getting arrested became an honour and the tactic “jail

not bail” developed (734). “Protesters used nonviolent tactics such as...sit-ins with the goal of getting arrested so that the city jail would become crowded” (“Boycotts, Movements and Marches”).

After a while, the sit-ins gave results and businesses in some areas decided to end segregation and discriminatory policies and to serve all customers regardless of race.

### **2.3. Freedom Rides**

After the successes achieved with the non-violent sit-ins and the challenging of the Jim Crow laws, the freedom Rides ensued. According to Olethia Davis, two organisations that played a key role in the organisation of Freedom Rides were the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), both of which fought for civil rights and used nonviolent civil resistance modelled in the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi (183-184)). Like their young colleagues from the SNCC, the members of CORE believed that ‘all people are created equal’ and together they organized the Rides throughout the Deep South in 1961 (O. Davis 183-184).

However, the Rides were not organised spontaneously but were inspired by the following Supreme Court decision: “The Supreme Court ruled in *Boynton v. Virginia* that racial segregation in bus terminals violated the Interstate Commerce Act. This decision effectively banned segregation on interstate buses and at the terminals servicing such buses” and in order to test this decision, two separated groups took off from Washington with the goal of reaching New Orleans (Harold). They were travelling with different companies: Greyhound and Trailways and when the Greyhound bus reached Anniston, Alabama a mob slashed their tires and set the bus on fire (“54d. The Sit-In Movement”). According to Bausum, after the bus was set on fire, the passengers were severely beaten as they were trying to escape the burning bus and the second bus that arrived in Birmingham also faced violence from an awaiting group of Ku Klux Klan members who negotiated with the police to have 15 minutes with the Riders and the Ku Klux Klan members beat the Riders severely (“James Zwerg Recalls”). These attacks were one of the most brutal attacks endured up to then by activists, but the violence did not stop there and neither did the rides of the activists.

The Freedom Riders did not consist just of African Americans. There were also white people who saw a necessity for change, and they were also subjected to the aggression of the white mob so that “violence would not be limited to the African American riders” (Harold). This shows how deep-rooted the hatred of certain groups was. The violent mob could neither

stand those of black skin nor those of white skin who were in support of antisegregation and equal rights.

Because of the brutality that accompanied the Freedom Rides, “Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy was forced to intercede to ensure the safety of the riders” (Wallach 159) and “the freedom riders had to complete their journey by plane” (“54d. The Sit-In Movement”).

This was not the end of the Freedom Rides. Bausum notes that the SNNC members from Nashville decided that violence should not stop their efforts. Despite the risks they decided to continue the Freedom Rides by travelling to Birmingham. During their trip, they were arrested and harassed by the police which later had to protect them from the mob in Birmingham. The trip continued under heavy protection of the police that was ordered by the government, but the protecting forces were not allowed to cross the Montgomery city line and when the Riders arrived at Montgomery another brutal beating took place (“James Zwerg Recalls”).

Despite the repeated violence, the Freedom Rides continued but never again attracted so much attention or violence (Bausum). In the end, the Rides were successful and “the Interstate Commerce Commission ... [wrote] regulations prohibiting Jim Crowism in interstate bus terminals. In November 1961, the regulations went into effect” (Howard 147).

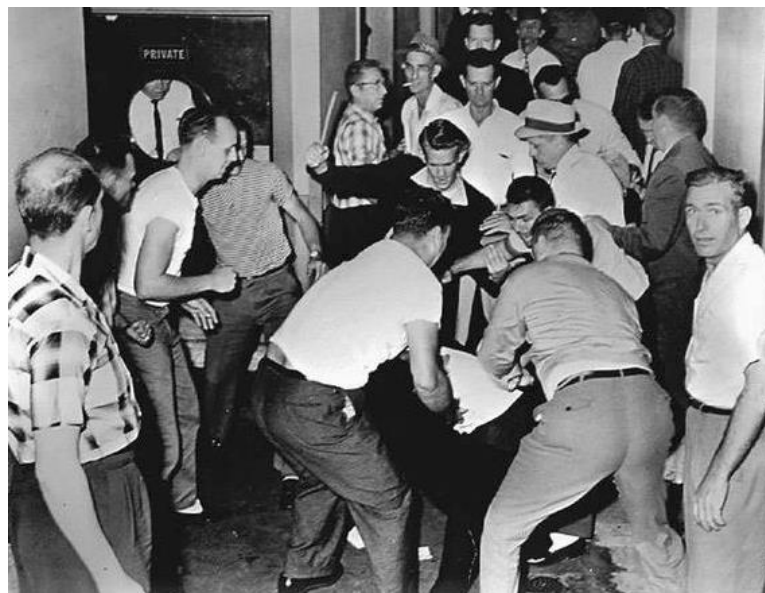


Fig 2. The second bus arrives in Birmingham where another mob brutally assaults the riders.

(“Civil Rights Movement Photographs.”Civil Rights Movement Veterans,

<https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgfr.htm>. Accessed 27 June 2019.)

## 2.4. The March on Washington

The peaceful protests continued in the forms of marches and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is remembered as the most significant (“March on Washington”). It is believed to be one of the most important events of the Civil Rights Movement in the sense that it was the most influential event that helped to achieve the official end of segregation. Soon after the March on Washington the Civil Rights Act was passed. The March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs occurred in 1963 (“March on Washington”) and the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 (Harold). This means that the march fulfilled its purpose because it served “to pressure President Kennedy into passing a civil rights bill to end Jim Crow” (Harold).

According to a HISTORY article, A. Philip Randolph, the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was preparing a march for jobs, while King, the president of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), was preparing a march for freedom so they decided to combine their efforts and form one march that was attended by around 250, 000 people (“March on Washington”).

During the event numerous speakers contributed their efforts and it was one of the rare events during the Civil Rights Movement that was entirely peaceful in contrast to the “violent year in civil rights history” (Howard 149). As shown in the examples that were listed above, usually peaceful protests undertaken by the African Americans in order to fight racial discrimination, ironically always ended in an extreme amount of violence coming from the white supremacists. According to Howard, this can be contributed to the fact that president Kennedy feared that the marchers would be attacked and that the march would end in violence (149) and because of it he “tasked his brother and attorney general, Robert F. Kennedy, with coordinating with the organisers to ensure all security precautions were taken” (“March on Washington”).

The marching crowd comprised people from different organisations, from different parts of America and people of different skin colour. The diverse, united crowd, marching together for the same cause showed that it was about time that the system supporting discrimination came to an end. “It was an entirely peaceful demonstration and undoubtedly showed Congress that the American people supported the dismantling of Jim Crow” (Howard 149). The mentioned march, together with the other types of peaceful protests brought about significant changes that resulted in the introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

“Affecting the fields of education, health care, and labour, the CRA outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, and national origin in public accommodations and employment” (Harold). In addition, another act was signed in 1965, the Voting Rights Act, which banned educational requirement for voting (Harold). These Acts marked the legal end of Jim Crow Laws, but in reality, according to Howard, it took much longer to obliterate its practices (149).

#### **2.4.1 Martin Luther King Jr.**

The significance of the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs will be remembered as well as the valuable contribution of its lead organizer “Martin Luther King, Jr., [who] was a theologian, social activist, lecturer, and author” (Dennis 439) and the most prominent name in the peaceful battle against racial discrimination. In everything he did, he advocated peaceful actions. This advocacy for peace had roots in his upbringing because his parents “made it a point to remind him that it was very important to transcend hate, even from those who publicly humiliated you” (Dennis 439). As his philosophy concerning peaceful actions developed, it became similar to Gandhi’s, with whom he had been inspired. “King had...a fascination with the writings of Mahatma Gandhi” (Brown 2). He saw disobedience through nonviolence as a tool for procuring social change.

Considering Martin Luther King’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, his immense popularity does not come as a surprise. His charisma turned him into a leadership figure for all of those fighting for the cause of civil rights. At the same time, this leadership imposed a threat for all of those who could not say goodbye to the Jim Crow system. The threat came from the fact that King showed to be successful in mobilizing and inspiring masses, which is apparent from the role he played in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. “Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was at the same time one of the most beloved and one of the most hated men of his time” (“54f. Martin Luther King Jr.”). His leadership skills are the most visible in the compelling and inspiring “I Have a Dream” speech that he delivered in Washington during the March for Jobs and Freedom. The speech became “one of the most famous orations of the civil rights movement—and of human history” (“March on Washington”). It was his speech “which brought the entire march to an emotional climax” (Brown and Stentiford 21).

In 1964, King won the Nobel Prize for Peace (“54f. Martin Luther King Jr.”). From this, it is visible that his efforts to create social change by peaceful measures were recognised. The Nobel Prize brought him publicity and he gained even wider recognition. Not long after he won the Noble Prize for Peace, the hatred and fear of those threatened by his success culminated. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968, by James Earl Ray (“54f. Martin Luther King Jr.”). His contribution to the time in which he lived was immense and for this reason, his legacy still lives on extending his influence into the present.

### 3. Protest Poems

Poetry as a form of protest differs from the previously mentioned forms of protest because it is expressed through art. But poetry too can send a powerful message. It has the ability to touch people and therefore it can be used to spread messages and awareness about certain issues. Some poets who were dissatisfied with American society used poetry as a tool to influence social change. The “Ballad of Birmingham” by Dudley Randall, “Backlash Blues” by Langston Hughes and “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou have been selected as representative poems about racial discrimination and its consequences.

#### 3.1 “Ballad of Birmingham” by Dudley Randall

Dudley Randall’s poem “Ballad of Birmingham,” according to Boyd, was written in 1963 and it was “Randall’s most prominent civil rights poem” (5). The poem was made in the light of the tragic events that took place in Birmingham in the same year “the year of heightened civil rights protests” (Melhem 162) when: “a bomb exploded before Sunday morning services at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama—a church with a predominantly black congregation that also served as a meeting place for civil rights leaders” (“Birmingham Church Bombing”). It is important to note that “Birmingham itself was then regarded as the ‘capital’ of segregation” (Melhem 162). The bombing took the lives of four young girls and it is considered to be a violent response to the March on Washington that took place prior to the bombing. It was another peaceful protest that resulted in violence.

The poem portrays a young child who wants to go to a freedom march, but his mother is against it, having in mind that despite the peaceful nature of such marches, they inevitably end in violence:

“Mother dear, may I go downtown  
Instead of out to play,  
And march the streets of Birmingham  
In a Freedom March today?”  
“No, baby, no, you may not go,  
For the dogs are fierce and wild,  
And clubs and hoses, guns and jails  
Aren’t good for a little child.”

By using an image of a young child who wants to participate in the freedom march Randall exemplifies the awareness even children had about the status of African Americans in the society. According to Melhem, Randall focuses on a single child in order to personalize the horror and the context of it (162). The poem served as a warning about the violence that the African Americans were forced to suffer during their fight for civil rights. The poem points out that the violence affected even children and had serious consequences, like the death of the four girls. The mother sends her child to a church instead of the march, thinking about the child's safety:

“No, baby, no, you may not go,  
For I fear those guns will fire.  
But you may go to church instead  
And sing in the children’s choir.”

The lines “The mother smiled to know her child / Was in the sacred place,” (21-22), reveal that a church was considered to be a sacred place and as such it was very unexpected that it was the place where the child dies in the bombing. The real event of the church bombing showed that the danger of racial discrimination and hatred is omnipresent: “the poem conveys the dreadful lesson: No place is sacred or safe in such a time and place” (Melhem 162).

By portraying this event through a poem Randall paid his respects to the victims and spread awareness about the suffering of the whole black community caused by racism. The poem showed the need to end oppression in the Jim Crow South by emphasizing how deeply rooted racial prejudice was and how far the white supremacists were ready to go.

### **3.2 “Backlash Blues” by Langston Hughes**

Langston Hughes’ poem “Backlash Blues” “was written ... sometime in 1966” (Tkweme 508). The poem was created in the years in which the battle against social injustice was still teeming. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Act of 1965 had just been signed, but their implementation was slow and steady.

“Backlash Blues” criticises American society and the treatment of the African Americans within the society: “Mister Backlash, Mister Backlash, / Just who do you think I am?” (1-2). It explores many of the issues African Americans were facing in their contemporary society and as such it serves as a witness of the time in which it was created. According to Thomas, Hughes describes problems of segregation and social injustice very



explicitly in the poem (29). Therefore, the poem gives an insight into the struggles that were the causes behind the protests of the civil rights activists and also shows the necessity for the protests.

At the same time, the poem itself promotes the civil rights of African Americans, but also the rights of other groups:

But the world is big,  
The world is big and round,  
Great big world, Mister Backlash,  
Big and bright and round—  
And it's full of folks like me who are  
Black, Yellow, Beige, and Brown.

The poem implies that unity is the way to achieve civil rights “it...politically unites marginalised sectors of non-white individuals, who occupy the limits of white social, political and economic orders. The uniting of these individuals is encouraged in order to challenge and destabilise this system of oppression and exclusion” (Thomas 29).

It points out the issue of unfair economic and social treatment, which results in the African Americans being degraded to second class citizens:

You give me second-class houses,  
Give me second-class schools,  
Second-class houses  
And second-class schools.  
You must think us colored folks  
Are second-class fools.

As a Hughes scholar Tracy points out, the poem focuses on the ways that “the system attempts to guarantee the failure of the black man in that society” (qtd. in Tkweme 509). The poem refers to the segregation in the public areas and facilities imposed on the African American citizens by the Jim Crow laws. The facilities reserved for those of black skin colour were often faulty and not equal to those reserved for the white population, regardless of what the doctrine “separate but equal” implies. “The poem targets longstanding assumptions about the inferiority of the Negro, as well as governmental and institutional policies that marginalized African American[s]” (Tkweme 509). African Americans were being sent to the war against Vietnam to fight for America, their country, in which, at the same time they were being treated as second class citizens: “You raise my taxes, freeze my wages, / Send my son

to Vietnam” (5-6). By juxtaposing these two images Hughes emphasizes the unfair treatment of African Americans.

Then, the focus shifts to the hatred of white supremacists and their backlash against all the efforts of African Americans for equality, hence the title *Backlash Blues*:

When I try to find a job  
To earn a little cash,  
Try to find myself a job  
To earn a little cash,  
All you got to offer  
Is a white backlash.

“‘The *Backlash Blues*’ evoked what American mass media in the mid-1960s was calling the ‘white backlash,’ the widespread and growing disapproval of the activities if not goals of the civil rights movement among white U. S. citizens” (Tkweme 509). The poem expresses sadness caused by human cruelty and the oppression and criticizes the contemporary state of affairs calling for change and an end to such an unfair system. Thus, the poem is somewhat a form of a protest too.

### **3.3 “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou**

Like the previous two poems, Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” can also be considered a protest poem. The fact that it was published in 1978 confirms the repeatedly mentioned claim that destroying the Jim Crow system took time, even after its legal end. The poem is a symbol of hope in which “Maya Angelou succeeds in reaching out, touching others, and offering hope and confidence in times of humiliation and despair” (Bloom 50). Throughout the poem the same message is sent, to continue fighting against any form of oppression and injustice: “by using the repetitious phrase ‘I rise,’ she emphasizes her courageous stance” (Bloom 50).

Written in the context of the battle against racial discrimination, the poem criticizes decades of oppression suffered by the African Americans in American society. The lines “You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies, / You may trod me in the very dirt” (1-3) emphasize the oppression. However, the poem is a statement of strong rejection of this oppression and we recognize Angelou’s refusal to be the subject of it and therefore she speaks in the name of the entire African American community:

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

She uses simple language that is easy to understand, and this helps her in transmitting the message to everyday people: “Angelou was focused on making her own letters crystal clear—and it won her an audience” (Schneiderman 12).

The poem refers to the deep-rooted beliefs of black inferiority instilled in the white population since the time of colonialism on American soil:

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.  
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Such thinking is challenged by the images of the constant rising of those in oppression above this belief. It portrays many of the issues her people suffered because of slavery and violence, and after the abolishment of slavery, because of the continuation of violence and hatred:

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

The poem calls for an end to such treatment, and it delivers an empowering message: that they will continue with their pursuits regardless. It “presented a strong sense of self that critiqued, took on, and ultimately prevailed over the societal voices that would limit and demean” (Wissman 40).

## **Conclusion**

When taking a look into how African Americans fought racial discrimination it is visible that for the most part they chose non-violent methods, despite the hardships and hatred directed towards them. From their first arrival to America, African Americans faced numerous obstacles and challenges among which were slavery and the Jim Crow Laws that supported segregation based on race. However, there were those who were determined to bring about change and most of them chose to do so non-violently. A closer look at the major events that occurred in the 1950s and the 1960s offers insight into the forms of peaceful protests that were used to tackle certain discriminatory policies. By boycotting public transport the Montgomery Bus Boycott tackled the separate bus section issue, the sit-ins fought whites-only lunch counters by organizing group sit-ins in restaurants, the Freedom Rides, similar to sit-ins in form only taking place in buses, confronted the public transport discriminatory policies and the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs aimed to end discrimination in all aspects of American life. Among the many protesters who contributed to the Civil Rights Movement, the popularity of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, as advocates of peaceful measures, speaks in favour to the claim that most African Americans saw non-violent means as the most appropriate tool for fighting racial discrimination. In addition, as another means of protest, poetry as a protest through art depicted the reality of African American life in American society and also called out for change. To conclude, the role of the mentioned events, people and selected poems underlines the claim that despite the experienced violence and suffering, African Americans chose for the most part non-violent means in their struggle against discrimination, segregation and inequality. Thus, peaceful protests resulted in significant changes in the position of African Americans in American society. Above all the changes are visible in a series of Supreme Court decisions that were a direct result of these peaceful efforts and attest to the effectiveness of such an approach.

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