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**Racism in American Suburbia: Narratives in History and
Film**

Bakalářská práce

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Anglický jazyk se zaměřením na vzdělávání

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně a použil jen uvedených pramenů literatury.

V Olomouci dne

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis will be dealing with Racism in American suburbia and its depiction in movies and literature. This thesis will be divided into four parts – History of racism in the United States, History of racism in the American suburbia, Depiction of racism in the movie *Suburbicon* and Depiction of racism in *Crisis in Levittown*. The main objective of this thesis is to present the historical development of racism in American suburbia and to show, whether this problematic persists to this day, alongside with researching USA's involvement in these racist policies, which is also known as institutional racism. It is also important to note that any N-word in this essay is not to be considered as a form of hate speech, but that it is solely used to quote from reliable sources.

1. Introduction

As the title suggests, this thesis will be dealing with racism in American suburbia. The aim of this thesis is to research the development of American suburbia, racism in American suburbia and its impact today. Another aim is to investigate USA's involvement in these racist policies (also known as institutional racism). Methods used in this thesis are books, articles, documents, documentary and a movie.

The first chapter, History of racism in the United States, will provide the reader with knowledge about racism in the United States.

The next part, History of Racism in American suburbia will be divided into individual subchapters, which will be dealing with reasons for suburbanization, some important terms, the history of Levittown and laws and their impact on racial development. This chapter will provide an insight into this problematic and will help the reader understand this topic on a larger scale.

The following chapter, Depiction of racism in movie *Suburbicon* will provide an insight into racial diversity in suburbs in the 1950s.

The last chapter, Depiction of racism in *Crisis in Levittown* will be dealing with development of Levittown, the most iconic suburbs in the US. This chapter will analyze the documentary *Crisis in Levittown*, giving a true insight into suburban mentality and look for reasons why people were opposed to integration.

2. History of racism in the United States

2.1. How it all started

The United States of America has always been welcoming to immigrants. This is supported by O'Callaghan (1990, p.4), he stated that that Europeans called America “the New World”. Settlers were arriving to this continent from all parts of Europe in the early 15th century and onwards (O'Callaghan, 1990). And as a result, Native Americans were oppressed and murdered, so that new civilization – as the one in Europe – could begin. This, however, was impossible to be made without sacrifices. First was the clash between the British and Americans that finally gave life to what would soon be known as the United States of America.

2.2. Atlantic Slave Trade

Early years in the states were agriculturally oriented. According to O'Callaghan (1990, p.21), by 1760, most Americans were farmers (O'Callaghan, 1990). However, many Americans had a certain class and way of life and the most of them did not really want to bother working in the dirt and mud. And that is the reason why slavery became an important part of America's economy.

Transatlantic slave trade involved the transportation of enslaved African people. There were many slaves and numbers kept growing and growing. O'Callaghan (1990, p.44) made an interesting note: “In the year 1810 there were 7.2 million people in the United States. For 1.2 million of these people the word of the Declaration of Independence “that all men are created equal” were far from true.” (O'Callaghan, 1990) He then mentions that slaves were used for cultivating tobacco, rice and cotton. The transportation of slaves was done by ships. Unfortunately, in such numbers, it is given that living conditions on the ships were very bad and it is no surprise that diseases and hunger were common. Despite its popularity in the South, it is needed to note that slavery was not an ideal economical formula. The outcome of the Civil War clearly suggests that a free market is, in many ways, better than the slave market.

The following article by Williamson and Cain (2020), demonstrates how slaves were expensive. An average price for a slave in the mid-19th century was \$400, a 2016 equivalent ranged \$12.500 and \$205.000. The prices varied from slaves to slave – some were more valuable, and some were less valuable (Williamson and Cain, 2020).

O'Callaghan (1990, p.50) then explains how and why Civil War took place. Northern states were anti-slavery and the Southern were pro-slavery. But this was not the deciding factor – many people found it hard to pick sides. And as a result, in some cases, families were divided. In one family, for example, two brothers became generals, but one for each side (O'Callaghan, 1990). Although slavery was not the only reason for Civil War, it did play one of the key roles. The most notable outcome of the Civil War was the abolishment of slavery. During reconstruction (see Chapter 2.3), many businesses had to readjust. Slavery did not disappear completely due to newly implemented Black Codes I will be demonstrating in the following chapter.

2.3. Reconstruction Era

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” (U.S. Const. amend. XIII.) This 13th amendment granted the African American people more power by abolishing slavery. They, however, were still not equal citizens. This was due to so-called “Black Codes” passed by the Southern States between years 1865-1866.

In general, black codes were restrictive laws that limited the freedom of all African Americans. Even though the South lost, and millions of slaves were granted freedom, it was, due to Black Codes, still a very limited freedom. Laws were humiliating and, what more, if violated, there were consequences, such as arrests, fines or forced labor. How extreme those restrictions really were can be seen on the extract of the following laws, as provided by Blake (2012, p.20).

- Freedmen could not assemble without the presence of a white person.
- Freedmen were assumed to be agricultural workers and their duties and hours were tightly regulated.

- Freedmen were not to be taught to read or write.
- Public facilities were segregated.
- Violators of these laws were subject to being whipped or branded.

Many of these laws ensured long-term economic success of white citizens, and the following is a great example, too: “Freedmen were not to be taught to read or write”, this law made it even harder for African American citizens to get other than mediocre job in the long run at best. The fact that African Americans were restricted from being educated affected not only them, but also their next of kin, as it is well-known that many young people take on the same priorities and interests as their parents. If their parents are uneducated, it is very likely that their children will not, even if made possible for them, also be interested in education.

2.4. The Great Migration and housing situation in Chicago

The Great Migration during the first half of the twentieth century is one of the epic demographic transformations of the United States. People left the rural south in droves, and headed to Southern cities and, more numerous, to Northern cities. During the 1910s, for example, the South saw an out-migration of 450,000 African Americans. During the 1920s, an additional 750,000 moved away. In 1900, 90% of all African Americans had lived in Southern states. By 1930, it was 79% (Tolnay and Beck, 1990).

What caused problems for many people was the sudden mixture of African American and American culture. According to Tolnay (2003), these problems, such as violence and hostility amongst races, were not unusual. Within Chicago, for example, between 1910 and 1970, the percentage of African Americans leapt from 2.0 percent to 32.7 percent (Tolnay, 2003). And since hundreds of thousands African Americans, who had just moved to Chicago, became a primary target for racist Americans, they created their own segregated communities. It is, however, important to note that many white people in Chicago did not organize riots, attacks, etc. They were simply afraid and skeptical. They were taught from young age that African Americans are bad, they were worried about their property values and potentially increasing criminality.

The Great Migration was a time era which went side by side with Jazz Age, also known as the Roaring Twenties. The Jazz Age is called after the music genre – jazz. According to Gioia (2011, p. 309), jazz was extremely popular, having many variations and subgenres and was still popular in the 1960s – this was called Free Jazz. Gioia (2011, pp. 8-9) also talks about the beginnings of jazz, where he states, that African American work songs were the predecessors of jazz (Gioia, 2011). Jazz quickly became popular all over the states. It is important to note that during jazz age and despite its popularity, African American jazz authors were still facing a discrimination and many often became targets of riots.

With over 3,000 new African American citizens coming to Chicago each week, it was really challenging for them to find a decent job and a decent living. Although other techniques had been used for racial segregation, such as redlining and exclusive zoning to a single-family housing, the political leaders of Chicago made it even harder by adapting new racially restrictive covenants. According to Plotkin (1998), in 1924, Nathan MacChesney, a prominent Chicago attorney and a member of the Chicago Planning Commission, drafted an addition to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Real Estate Boards that "forbade realtors to introduce members of any race or nationality" into neighborhoods where their presence would damage property values. In 1927, MacChesney drafted a model racial restrictive covenant for the Chicago Real Estate Board, only targeting African Americans. The Chicago Real Estate Board promoted the covenant to YMCAs, churches, women's clubs, PTAs, Kiwanis clubs, chambers of commerce and property owners' associations. Hyde Park, Woodlawn, Park Manor, South Shore, and other neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side adjacent to the so-called "black belt," responded as well as outlying Chicago neighborhoods and suburbs. Additionally, the University of Chicago was a strong supporter of the covenant campaign in Washington Park, although they denied their affiliation for many years. In 1948, the United States Supreme Court ruled that enforcement of racial restrictive covenants was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court's ruling, however, did not put an end to the problem of African Americans finding adequate housing (Plotkin, 1998).

From what was going on in Chicago, it is clear to see the methods and reasons behind housing racial segregation all over the states – white people simply did not want black neighbors and the realtors did not want to lose money by allowing this to happen, so it was in their best interest to separate majorities from minorities. This was, of course, supported by the government - the more buyers, the more taxes. And in the United States, property taxes are especially important, because they pay for facilities such as schools and local infrastructure,

and as a result, white neighborhoods were much more developed compared to black neighborhoods. This was not only in Chicago, but also in the suburbs.

2.5. World War II and Civil Rights Era

One of the main triggers for equality were the Jim Crow laws. Tischauser (2012) states, that Jim Crow laws were in effect during 1881 to 1964 and separated Americans in 26 states. As she stated later: “The goal of Jim Crow laws was to create a legal system that offered the same protection against black “beastliness”, that had been established by slave codes. Instead of chains, whips, and deadly fear, however laws, jails, powerlessness, and the constant fear of death would provide those protections.” (Tischauser, 2012, p. 11-12), Jim Crow laws were another good example of America’s institutional racism. Jim Crow Laws pretty much affected the daily life of black Americans. These laws, as pointed out earlier, ensured separation of African Americans from the whites. Segregated places were, for example, waiting rooms in a workplace, restrooms, entrances, elevators, cemeteries and even hospitals. Segregation did not only apply to building and public places, it also applied to textbooks and schools – a textbook for white students could not be used by black students. This education disadvantage would not allow black citizens to get a proper education, they therefore had worse jobs, less money and, most importantly, less power.

In 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement was finally gaining attention and power. A lot of attention and momentum, sadly, were received due to violent crimes and injustice towards African Americans. The murder of Emmett Till, for example, played a big role in CRM’s increasing power and recognition. As Metress (2002, p.13), wrote in his book: “On August 24, 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago, entered a rural grocery store in the small hamlet of Money, Mississippi. Because the young boy had been bragging about his friendship with white people up north, his southern cousins had dared him to go into the grocery store and say something to the white woman working the register. Emmett accepted their challenge, moments later he was at the counter, set on purchasing two cents worth of bubble gum. What he did or said next will never be known for certain, but whatever passed between these two strangers from two very different worlds set off a chain reaction that would forever change the way we talk about race in America.” (Metress, 2002) Four days after this event, her husband and his half-brother kidnapped little Emmett, beat him up and later shot him in the

head. They were on a trial for homicide, but their act was acquitted due to an all-white jury. On a side note, the all-white jury was also in the infamous O. J. Simpson trial and “played a race card”. According to Emmett Till’s biography, more than six decades later, in January 2017, Timothy Tyson, author of *The Blood of Emmett Till* and a senior research scholar at Duke University, revealed that in a 2007 interview Carolyn admitted to him that she had lied about Till making advances toward her. In response to heightening discrimination and violence, non-violent acts of protest began to occur (*Emmett Till - Death, Movie & Funeral - Biography*, 2020). For example, in February 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, four young African American college students entered a Woolworth store and sat down at the counter but were refused service. The men had learned about non-violent protest in college and continued to sit peacefully as whites tormented them at the counter, pouring ketchup on their heads and burning them with cigarettes. After this, many sit-ins took place in order to non-violently protest racism and inequality. Sit-ins continued throughout the South and spread to other areas. Eventually, after many sit-ins and other non-violent protests, including marches and boycotts, places began to agree to desegregate (Berkin, Miller, Cherny and Gormly, 2014).

The safety of African Americans was still problematic. Whether a person was an individual or in a group, it was still a risk. African Americans were not even safe in their own churches. The KKK did all they could to disrupt the lives of African Americans. One of the most violent terrorist attacks in the 1960s was the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama on September 1963. According to the FBI, a dynamite bomb detonated around 10:24 AM on Sept. 15, 1963. The bomb exploded on the east side of the building, where five girls were getting ready for church in a basement restroom. This act of terror resulted in over 20 injuries and the death of four girls (*Baptist Street Church Bombing | Federal Bureau of Investigation*, 2020). This crime had led to a national outrage. Birmingham, Alabama, was the perfect target for KKK due to its history. Birmingham was a major site of protests, marches and sit-ins, often resulting in police brutality and violence (Parrott-Sheffer, 2019). Despite the national outrage, violence around churches did not stop there. In the following years, there were many more fires set to churches around the South.

The Civil Rights Movement was also sparked by a great number of individuals. According to O’Callaghan (1990, p.113), one of the most famous was Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks was a 42-year-old woman in 1955. After a day at work, she found a seat on the bus. However, in each bus, there was a section for whites and for African Americans. A white man got on the bus and could not find a spot. He immediately noticed Rosa sitting in the white section, so the

bus driver order Rosa and three others to give up their seats. She refused, got arrested, and thus began The Montgomery Bus Boycott which lasted for over a year. On November 14, 1956, and as a result, the Supreme Court banned segregated seating (Callaghan, 1990).

King led the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 which reached a wide audience of both African American and white citizens. He also became Southern Christian Leadership Conference's first president. He led a series of protest in the east of USA. This had escalated in 1963 on a march to Washington with his famous "*I Have a Dream Speech*". This speech had reached a wide audience. "The power of King's message 50 years ago can be seen in the way the BBC in London is celebrating what most Americans think of as a purely domestic event. The British national broadcaster has distilled the essence of King's lasting appeal with a broadcast that has recruited dissident world leaders, peacemakers and protesters to each read aloud a part of King's speech a more earnest iteration of the "We Are The World" format previously used by pop musicians to raise money for disaster relief. It will be heard by the BBC's audience of 239 million worldwide." (Wapshott, 2014)

O'Callaghan (1990, pp.108-100), mentioned that John F. Kennedy sympathized with African Americans. "He was a Democrat, just like Roosevelt. He tried to help the poor with government money and food. He also wanted to help other groups who were not getting a fair deal, like black Americans." (O'Callaghan, 1990). Across the nation, he won the majority of votes. When President Kennedy took office in January 1961, African Americans were a step closer to equality. Apart from that, he also spoke against school segregation.

Over 200,000 people visited Washington to take part in a mass demonstration, which, according to O'Callaghan (1990, p.114), was the climax of Civil Rights Movement. Side by side, white and black Americans protested together. As mentioned previously, here in Washington Martin Luther King had his famous "*I Have a Dream*" speech. Five years after Kennedy's assassination, Civil Rights Movement spokesman Martin Luther King was also assassinated. This happened on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. He was shot dead on the balcony of a motel with a sniper rifle. Later, he died in a hospital (O'Callaghan, 1990). Although there had been many rumors and conspiracies regarding Luther's death, none was officially proven to be true.

As a result, King's assassination sparked a series of riots throughout the United States. Many African Americans believed that this was an end of all non-violent means of racial equality fight. The numbers were astonishing: "America's black inner cities exploded. Over the

next several days, more than 100 cities experienced significant outbreaks of rioting, arson, looting, and violence. In all, some 27,000 people were arrested, about 3,500 were injured, and more than 40 were killed. Some 6,100 people were arrested and more than 1,000 were injured in the national capital alone. In Chicago there were some 125 fires and 11 deaths. In Baltimore more than 5,000 federal troops patrolled the city in an attempt to forestall arson. Only after police forces around the country had been reinforced by some 58,000 U.S. National Guard and Army troops did the violence subside.” (Wallenfeldt, 2019)

2.6. Racism in the United States today

Public opinion towards racism in the US has changed greatly when we compare 20th and 21st century. Nowadays, many people in the US resent racism. If a public figure (celebrity, politician) is found to be a racist, it can very easily put an end to his or her career.

Early beginnings of rap in the 1980s have sparked tolerance and sympathies towards African Americans, especially amongst young people. Hip Hop has always been political and many, even white rappers, deal with the issue of racism in their works. Macklemore is a great example; he has released three songs – *White Privilege* (2005) and *White Privilege* (2016).

The cast of many young people’s favorite TV Shows always stars African Americans – this is a process thanks to which white people view African Americans as “normal” and “equal”. It is not unusual to see the race question being discussed or, at least, pointed out in contemporary movies. This can be seen in contemporary beloved TV shows such as *Stranger Things*, *Sex Education*, *You*, *Lucifer* and many others which appeal primarily to the younger audience. And the reason is simple – a new, open-minded welcoming generation is being formed.

Black Lives Matter is a social activist movement originating in the African American community. And it all started with a hashtag (#). The roots go back to 2013, as stated in one NY Times article. It however had a sustained increase in use in 2014 when Michael Brown and Eric Garner died in encounters with the police (Chokshi, 2016). It regularly holds peaceful protests against police brutality and killings of black people and racial profiling. This social movement has gained attention in the past years, some even call it Civil Rights Movement 2.0.

There have also been numerous instances of racist celebrity tweets from many years ago that were brought to attention in 2018 or 2019. This shed a bad light on them, almost ruining

their career. The main internet websites such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc. are becoming a safe space where any racism is labeled a hate speech – such comments and posts are automatically detected or reported by other users and it leads to their termination. These websites may pursue the authors of hate speech legally, but it only leads to mild punishments – the comments get deleted, users can be blocked from the website and videos can be demonetized (meaning the author will not get a revenue). Usually, if a celebrity nowadays is seen using the N-word, it is common for the person to make an apology video, donate some money to a charity, etc. Even though this may seem hypocritical, it is still a great start and an improvement. A great example of this is a famous Youtuber called Pewdiepie also known as Felix Kjellberg. In a 2017 NY Times article, the author describes this incident. Apparently, during a live streaming, this Youtuber said the N-word. He, however made an apology video saying there are no excuses for what he did. He added he is disappointed in himself (Ohlheiser, 2017). It goes without saying that his over 100 million subscriber base took notice. He greatly appealed to people about avoiding such language. His apology was very honest and was well accepted, even in the black community.

This can all be summed up in one category – social media. From all the points I have mentioned previously, nowadays, freedom of speech is practiced on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and even Instagram. Social media is a place where others want to look perfect. And since being racist is frowned upon, many public figures use these platforms to seem socially woke.

Although it is certain that racism will never vanish completely, there has been a great improvement over the years. The credit for equality goes to African American historical figures, artists, actors, politicians and to all the white people supporting this cause.

3. History of racism in American suburbia

American suburbia is in many movies portrayed as an iconic place – pretty white houses, perfectly trimmed lawns, wide streets for kids to play in and a typical yellow bus bringing children to and from a local school. It is usually viewed as a place with very little conflicts, too. Activities in the suburbs such as barbequing, sports, Halloween traditions, etc., are well-known. Whilst most of the residents in the suburbs are not racist, the story behind their neighborhoods most certainly is. The suburbs we know today was formed after the second World War. According to Oxford Research Encyclopedias, only 13% of population before WW2 has lived in the suburbs. Compared to today’s population of over 50%, this is a huge difference (Nicolaidis and Wiese., April 2017).

In this chapter, I will be focusing mostly on the history of Levittown, as it fully embodies the racism in American suburbs in general.

3.1. The reasons behind 1945 suburbanization

The United States were greatly affected by the events of WW2. This situation had a long-lasting impact on the housing situation. Nicolaidis and Wiese (2017) talk about a chaotic transition to peacetime society after 1945. According to experts, after the WW2, there was a shortage of 5 million homes nationwide. The roots of this housing shortage dated back to the Depression. After the war, veterans returned to “no vacancy” signs and experienced high rents. The authors then explain how government helped solve this housing crisis. “The Federal government provided a critical stimulus to suburbanization through policies that revolutionized home building and lending, subsidized home ownership, and built critical suburban infrastructure, such as the new interstate highway system.” (Nicolaidis and Wiese, 2017). It was a logical move from the US government. There was a lot of land that could be used effectively. Federal loans and private builders (such as William J. Levitt) cooperated and together, they built suburbs which led to the creation of many new communities. As a result, apartments in the city became vacant and the rent went down, which was good news for veterans. And not only veterans profited – American families, too.

3.2 White Flight and Sundown Towns

Previously mentioned young families were the biggest group buying houses in the suburbs. This has a tight connection to the term White Flight. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines White Flight as: “the departure of whites from places (such as urban neighborhoods or schools) increasingly or predominantly populated by minorities” (Merriam-Webster). The reason behind leaving places with minorities were simple – fear. Later in this thesis (see Chapter 5), concerns from the white communities had been raised. One of the biggest aspirations for escaping to an all-white community was the fear of mixed marriages. The citizens felt that eventually, their children would marry into an African American community and it would disrupt their community.

People who fueled white flight were the people who ended up in sundown towns. As Loewen (2018, p. VII-VIII) writes, sundown towns kept out African Americans for decades. Others excluded other minorities, such as Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Jews, and even Catholic and Mormon. In Illinois alone, there were over 500 such towns. But, according to him, sundown towns are now on the decline. And that is good news. One of the reasons, Loewen says, is the change in white ideology. It is no longer easy nowadays to keep minorities away and this, he links to America’s increasingly multiracial makeup (Loewen, 2018). This sentence was written between the years 2001-2005, when America’s “increasingly multiracial makeup” was minimal compared to nowadays. There was no African American president, there were no social media, there were no Black Lives Matter.

To better understand the mentality of sundown towns residents, it is helpful to focus on Part V of Loewen’s (2018, p.299) *Sundown Towns*. Here, he investigates the effect of sundown towns on whites. He asks a very interesting and important question: Do sundown communities collect white supremacists or create them? He says that sundown towns might be doing America a favor by isolating white racists from the outside world. According to him, people living in white only communities are less racist and less prejudiced towards gay people and other minorities (Loewen, 2018). It seems as if sundown towns residents do not consider them racists, and they make a good point, too. To Oprah Winfrey’s question: “You don’t believe that people of other races have the right to live here?”, an unidentified audience member replies: “They have the right to live wherever they want to, but we have the right to choose if we want a white community also. That’s why we moved here.” (Loewen, 2018, p. 301), which strikes another good question – are they racist for not welcoming a minority or do they have the right to feel

offended by minorities “forcing themselves” into their communities? The same question could also be asked in Levittown almost 30 years earlier with the first African American family moving in. As Gans (2017, p.383) wrote, it was not until after 6 years of Levittown’s existence, that is 1957, that the first African American family moved in (Gans, 2017). It was the Myers family. Their moving in caused a lot of disturbance in the community, which even escalated into riots. And what was the reason behind that? It was the fear of decreasing property values and intermarriage (Gans, 2017, p. 378). And maybe even, it was just their right feel offended and demonstrate. As I have written above, almost 30 years later, an audience member claimed that even though African Americans have the right to live anywhere, it is also the right of white people to live in a community they choose, meaning an all-white community. Sure, by today’s standards, moving into an all-white community with a purpose of escaping mixed neighborhoods is frowned upon and almost impossible, but back in the 1950s, it was the reality and there was a handful of people who would choose otherwise.

Modern sundown towns look much different now. According to Loewen (2018, pp. 381-382), it is very hard to answer whether there are still sundown towns, or whether they are the way they used to be (Loewen, 2018). He decided to investigate further and found some interesting facts. For example, Anna, Illinois, a former sundown town listed 89 African Americans in a population of 5,136 – but according to 2000 census, there was only one African American household with two people living in it. In 2002, however, nor the newspaper editor or reference librarian could think of one African American citizen living in Anna. In 2014, a local farmer, shocked ask, whether they are still a sundown town. Another town. Another example is Fouke, southwest Arkansas. There were only two African Americans listed (an elderly couple) amongst 814 residents (Loewen, 2018, pp. 382-383). Yet, the question remains, whether some towns still remain predominately white on purpose or whether this is simply caused by its year-long development.

3.3 The history of Levittown

The most important suburbs in America is Levittown. Levittown also works as the best example for depiction of racism in the American suburbia.

Gans (2017, p.3) wrote that the city of Levittown was built by builders Levitt and Son. The firm was founded during the Depression by the late Abraham Levitt, a “self-made” son of

Russian-Jewish immigrants. Abraham Levitt had built a number of small suburban subdivisions on Long Island, targeting the upper middle class. This had later developed into a mass production scheme that allowed them to build inexpensive housing for later generations (Gans, 2017). Further, Gans (2017, p.4) states that the plan was extremely successful, there was a house built every 16 minutes, all in the Nassau County, Long Island. Prior to building, there was the phase of planning, calculations and market research. Levitt and Son originally offered 4 types of houses ranging from \$11,500 to \$14,500 – this modern scheme would allow citizens to escape the rush of the city and move to a more suitable environment for young couples and families-to-be. What was positive for the new residents was the fact, that there was less concern with status than with livability and effective use of space. (Gans, 2017)

Gans (2017, p.10) also explained why the project was so successful. This was achieved due to a process called “trial and error” – if a model lacked something – it would be improved; and this process was perpetual. The process was not the fastest, as it was not until 1964 that the firm hired a city planner to help with arrangements – this would include the outlay of houses, public schools, swimming pools, etc. And not only that. There was a great market research and a prompt market answer. “If a model did not sell, it was redesigned at once. Usually the models were not altered until the annual model change or until sales dropped to a point where alteration was considered necessary.” (Gans, 2017, p. 10). This shows that Levitt put a lot of work into making sure people liked the suburbs. In many ways, one can say that it was just as much the buyer’s contribution to the community as Levitt’s to Levittown.

The firm tried to make the housing as desirable as possible. And that is why they tried to screen out two types of people: the marginal buyers and the socially undesirable or emotionally disturbed. Eventually, the criteria for screening out people have changed, but the utopian project brought in many ideal families which led to Levittown’s good publicity (Gans, 2017, p.13-14).

Ignoring the marginal buyers and socially undesirable, there was merely no option for African Americans to purchase a house in Levittown, giving rise to racism and its legacy that many suburbs carry until today. “Until the state enforced a nondiscrimination law, salesmen refused to sell to Negroes and assured whites who asked about Negroes that the community would be as lily-white as the other Levittowns. After the law was enforced, the salesmen protected themselves by citing the law, and promised to locate people who did not like to be near Negroes away from them, but also discouraged those who were strongly biased against Negroes from buying in Levittown.” (Gans, 2017, p.14)

This caused a tremendous racial segregation lasting till this day. Families, who already had houses there, were opposed to the idea of having African Americans in the area. This ideology was then, logically, passed from generation to generation

3.4 Life in Levittown

According to Gans (2017, p.39), there were many aspirations for people to move from the city to the suburbs. The most sought-after aspects were comfort and roominess, privacy and freedom, furnishing and decorating the new house and working around the house and yard, in garage and workshop. Also mentioned were better family life and better social life – this would mean new friends, good and sociable neighbors (Gans, 2017). All the aspirations can be narrowed down to one thing – the opposite of a crowded, roaring city.

As mentioned previously, there were four types of housing offered to people, each had a different price. This would allow a variety of social classes to move to the suburbs. Amongst those were the upper middle class, the lower middle class and the working class. Levittown offered a reasonable pricing and financing, so it is no wonder that three quarters of the residents were of the lower middle class. This mixture gave a nice and colorful social structure in Levittown. And what life in the city lacked, a quality tight-knit community and a social life, Levittown made up for it. From parks to supermarkets to hairdressers, Levittown had a lot of places to offer, where people (especially young families), could socialize.

Surprisingly, the community was fast growing since the beginning, as most of the residents settled down both in the house and in the community within the first months. Neighbors quickly developed relationships. Couples spent time with other couples, children played with their neighbor's children, and so on. Although many citizens were living in peace with one another, there were still some enemies and rivalry amongst them, but the percentage was very small and to be expected in such a big community.

Dominant forms of fun were barbequing, sports and holiday parties in which all the neighbors participated willingly. Should one fall ill, another neighbor quickly pitched in and helped. This made the community lively and trustworthy. Many voluntary associations were also founded in the neighborhoods, both by external and internal initiative; that is by residents or outsiders. Where people met each other the most, however, were churches. Gans (2017, pp.

68-73) shares that in Levittown, there were two types of churches: planned and unplanned. Planned churches were Protestants and Catholic. The unplanned churches were Jews. Jews were not previously considered, since they were a minority (Gans, 2017).

Due to schools being funded by property taxes, a good neighborhood guarantees good schools. And Levittown was no difference. One of the first buildings that were considered in the planning period were schools. Despite school segregation ending in the second half of the 20th century, schools in the suburbs remained predominantly white. As mentioned previously, these schools were founded by property taxes – due to this funding, schools had great facilities, qualified teacher and quality leisure activities. High school sports were also a key part of the suburbs. These sports were for example baseball, basketball and soccer. Such sports were not only an event for young players, but also a social event for their parents.

3.5 Discrimination in Levittown

Racial imbalance was the biggest in suburbia in its early days. In year 1953, Levittown had over 70,000 inhabitants of which none were African Americans. This was the largest white community in the entire USA (Cohen, 2004, p.217).

Due to many opinions, Levitt and Son were just a cog in the machine. His “White only” policy surely was racist, but it was not only the initiative of the firm. This was due to a so-called Mortgage discrimination. “Mortgage discrimination or mortgage lending discrimination is the practice of banks, governments or other lending institutions denying loans to one or more groups of people primarily on the basis of race, ethnic origin, sex or religion.” (Fernandez, 2007), but it was not only due to mortgage discrimination – as stated previously, salesmen in the early days were forbidden to sell houses to minorities, too.

In general, it was very challenging for African Americans to get a home loan. It was especially harder when the person wanted to buy a house in predominately white neighborhood. Nonetheless, the first African American Meyers family moved into Levittown relatively soon. This will be discussed further discussed in greater detail later in this thesis (see Chapter 5).

3.6 Laws and their impact on the racial development

In order to comprehend how actions of the state impacted the suburbs, it is important to look back to the 1930s and look at how FDR created loan programs as a part of the New Deal to help Americans finance their housing. Prior to 1930s, mortgages were a high-risk product for banks. The only targeted group was the upper class. And even for them, mortgage was much more challenging than today, because mortgages were often short term and required high down payments.

African Americans, however, were not only denied mortgage only due to their social status, they were mainly denied mortgage mainly because of their ethnics. This wade made by the Federal Housing Administration in 1934, which lasted till 1968. Despite FHA being celebrated by the wide public, it put minorities into disadvantage; it automatically denied black people to apply for a mortgage – this is called redlining. "Redlining destroyed the possibility of investment wherever black people lived." (Madrigal, 2014)

This meant that cities were divided into two parts. Good neighborhoods meant that no black people lived in them. If you lived in a good neighborhood, it was very easy to get a home loan. If you did not, it was impossible. In more detail, towns were divided into 4 subgroups – first grade, second grade, third grade and fourth grade. For a better understanding, I will be fully citing Alexis C. Madrigal.

“Yellow areas are characterized by age, obsolescence, and change of style; expiring restrictions or lack of them; infiltration of a lower grade population; the presence of influences which increase sales resistance such as inadequate transportation, insufficient utilities, perhaps heavy tax burdens, poor maintenance of homes, etc. "Jerry" built areas are included, as well as neighborhoods lacking homogeneity. Generally, these areas have reached the transition period. Good mortgage lenders are more conservative in the Yellow areas and hold loan commitments under the lending ratio for the Green and Blue areas.” (Madrigal, 2014)

"Green areas are "hot spots"; they are not yet fully built up. In nearly all instances they are the new well-planned sections of the city, and almost synonymous with the areas where good mortgage lenders with available funds are willing to make their maximum loans to be amortized over a 10-15-year period -- perhaps up to 75-80% of the appraisal. They are homogeneous; in demand as residential locations in "good time" or "bad"; hence on the upgrade". (Madrigal, 2014)

"Blue areas, as a rule, are completely developed. They are like a 1935 automobile still good, but not what the people are buying today who can afford a new one. They are the neighborhoods where good mortgage lenders will have a tendency to hold loan commitments 10-15% under the limit." (Madrigan, 2014)

"Red areas represent those neighborhoods in which the things that are now taking place in the Yellow neighborhoods, have already happened. They are characterized by detrimental influences in a pronounced degree, undesirable population or infiltration of it. Low percentage of home ownership, very poor maintenance and often vandalism prevail. Unstable incomes of the people and difficult collections are usually prevalent. The areas are broader than the so-called slum districts. Some mortgage lenders may refuse to make loans in these neighborhoods and other will lend only on a conservative basis." (Madrigan, 2014)

It was impossible for African Americans and other minorities to simply move into the green areas, it was forbidden by law. "Levittown homes must not be used or occupied by any person other than members of the Caucasian race." (Loewen, 2018). Developers, such as Levitt, were encouraged by the government to exclude minorities until 1948. Due to this development, Levittown remains predominately white. "Today Levittown has changed, but only a little. While the community has more minority residents than ever, it remains overwhelmingly white -- 97.37 percent in the 1990 census." (Lambert, 1997) It only makes sense, that with more residents, many businesses were set in this area. This dramatically increased the values of homes in the green area. And as a result, public facilities were better, too.

Eventually, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development made these practices illegal in the following years. However, residents of the red areas lacked wealth. Therefore, neighborhoods remained "segregated", as minorities could not afford to move into better areas. As a result, according to various sources, a school segregation to some extent persists, despite it being made illegal in 1964.

Local schools are primarily funded by property taxes. This means that if a school is in a white, wealthy neighborhood, it has more money on things such as facilities and supplies.

All this is a result of decades of legal segregation that impacts minorities till this day. Businesses are much better in white neighborhoods than they are in African American neighborhoods. So are schools, hospitals and community centers. Some even argue that housing discrimination, despite its illegality, still persists – African and American home seekers get

worse mortgages even if their credit is the same as the credit of white people. Four million instances of housing discrimination are reported every year (Hannah-Jones, 2012).

4. Depiction of racism in movie *Suburbicon*

In this chapter, I will be focusing on the main plot (Lodge family) and on the subplot (Mayers family). By doing that, I will try to point out how the racism is depicted and try to find relevant historical links – primarily Loewen (2018) and Gans (2017).

Suburbicon (2017) is a movie directed by George Clooney starring Matt Damon as the main character. This movie gives us a glimpse into a fictional suburban town called Suburbicon. This movie is tightly connected to documentary *Crisis in Levittown*, as most of the interviews from *Crisis in Levittown* can be heard or spotted throughout the movie. The resemblance between the fictional town Suburbicon and Levittown is uncanny. The links between real life Levittown and Suburbicon are clear to see. The first African American to move to Levittown was William Myers Jr and his family, in this movie, however, their family name was altered to Mayers. As stated previously, the movie focuses on the Lodge family, not the Mayers. Hence, the theme of racism is secondary, yet these two plots are connected by one binding element – Nicholas Lodge.

The movie, as stated previously, tells a story of a fictional town called Suburbicon. Built in 1947, Suburbicon was promised to be a place of prosperity for all. The movie begins with a commercial which shows how positive and progressive Suburbicon is – perfectly trimmed lawns, supermarket, clean environment, etc. The movie's plot begins with an arrival of a new family. The whole town is shocked and outraged when they find out that the family is African American. The mailman's positive "Have you met your new neighbors?" questions turns, after the realization, to a hysteric "Have you seen your new neighbors?!" (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 00:00-03:50).

Soon after, there is a town meeting, where all the citizens are outraged. Nobody knows why the Mayers were let in and by whom. People raise their concerns, one of them simply is "We don't want them here.", others are afraid that property values will drop. Many people are also sure that with the arrival of the first African American family, more are to follow soon. The debate escalates and does not seem to have an end. (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 03:50-04:15).

The neighboring home to Mayers' belongs to the Lodge family. The head of family, Gardner Lodge, is played by Matt Damon. His wife, Rose, is in a wheelchair. In the beginning, there is also Rose's sister, Margaret. They live with their son, Nicholas. In the movie, he is referred to as Nicky. Nicky is the purest of the family – he is not violent; he is not racist, and he is not

prejudice. Little Nicholas is a simple boy. He does not really speak much and is quite calm. After his mother sees little Andy, their African American neighbor, she tells Nicky to go play ball with him and introduce himself. After the initial refusal, Nicky gives in and starts hanging out with him. They are both the same age and become friends very quickly. Nicky asks him to play baseball by the nearby church, but Andy is little worried, as the church belongs to Episcopalians, a Christian religious group - (Suburbicon, 2017, 04:15-06:50) - their involvement later in the movie, however, is almost none. If nothing, the portrayal of Episcopalians shows that church groups had been integrated very early in the suburbs and a key part of the community. However, I think this was the director's intention as he wanted to show the early stages of development in Suburbicon, which were in greater detail described in *The Levittowners* (Gans, 2017, p. 68-73).

It is late at night and Nicky hears noises downstairs. He is woken up by his father, telling him to calmly go downstairs. His father is accompanied by a strange man. He tells him not to panic, saying the robbers will take what they want and leave shortly after. He sees his family held captive downstairs and, naturally, becomes very anxious and scared. They are all asked to sit in a chair to be tied. Only Nicky resists. After they are all tied, they sniff chloroform. All are put to sleep, but Rose gets a higher dose and Nicky sees this. He struggles, tries to fight it, but falls asleep (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 06:50-14:20).

After waking up in a hospital, Nicky overhears a doctor talking to Gardner and Margaret telling them that Rose had inhaled a lethal dose and her organs are failing. After finding out his mother is dead, his father, his aunt Margaret take Nicky and are on their way home. Here, Margaret tells him that she will be living with them for a while now. At the funeral, there is Nicky's uncle Mitch. These two have a very good relationship. He is constantly reassuring him that everything will be okay. Upon getting home, he goes into garden and Andy waves at him. Nicky approaches him and these two get to talking. "Your mama died?", asks Andy. These two have a conversation and, after a while, Andy gives him his snake. It is Nicky's first pet. This gesture can also be interpreted as a token of the first tangible interracial friendship in the town of Suburbicon (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 14:20-20:45).

Nicky does not really enjoy Maggie's company, but they spend time together. She walks him to a bus stop and all the ladies keep saying: "It's a terrible tragedy, so sorry for your loss." and one even says: "None of this happened here before these people moved in!" By these people she obviously means the Mayers family (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 20:45-23:45). In general, it was very convenient for the people of Suburbicon to pass blame on the African Americans. Most of

them had left the cities to live in a safe, all-white town. When a crime happened, citizens did not want to admit that it could have been committed by anyone else but a minority. In this scene, the people are blaming Mayers for what happened to Rose. In the later scenes, Gardner decided to pass blame onto Italian Americans by hiring them to kill his wife, who were also a minority.

Meanwhile, the movie focuses on Gardner again. Something seems off about him from the beginning. He walks into his office and everyone keeps giving him their condolences. He seems to be too okay given that his wife had just died. Eventually, he receives a phone call from Suburbicon PD. A policeman tells him that they had grabbed some suspects. Gardner, Maggie and Nicky go to the to the police station together. Gardner tells Nicky to stay outside, he does not want him to see the suspects. Gardner and Maggie see the murderers, but they do not identify them. It is obvious that they are hiding something. Eventually, Nicky slips into the room and immediately recognizes the two murderers. He also sees that Gardner and Maggie are not doing anything about it. He becomes scared and very suspicious. Right here, it is certain that Gardner had ordered the murder of his wife She was in a wheelchair and he wanted to replace her with someone more suitable for him (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 23:45-31:00). In many ways, Rose was a minority, too. Suburbicon was a town full of young, active, charming people and since she was handicapped, she did not fit in. There are historical facts to prove the discrimination of handicapped people, too: "...people with disabilities still did not have access to public transportation, telephones, bathrooms and stores. Office buildings and worksites with stairs offered no entry for people with disabilities who sought employment, and employer attitudes created even worse barriers. Otherwise talented and eligible people with disabilities were locked out of opportunities for meaningful work." (*A Brief History of the Disability Rights Movement*, 2020)

After that, Nicky has a chat with his father. His father, quite aggressively, tells him that it was not the robbers that he saw. Nicky disagrees but is silenced. He now does not feel safe in his own house. He also finds out about his father's relationship with Maggie. One night, he hears some noises coming from downstairs. He picks up a knife and heroically marches into the basement ready to attack. To his surprise, he sees his father and Margaret having sex. He cannot believe his eyes and now resents Margaret. (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 33:15-35:20)

After this scene, we can see how well Margaret is doing in Suburbicon. She is walking down the street, smiling. She walks into a hairdresser and gets new hair done. Along with other women, she is sitting there, enjoying the atmosphere and reading a magazine. It can be seen here that Suburbicon is an idyllic, almost a utopian place (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 35:20-37:00).

The next scene takes place at the Mayers house. Little Andy is playing outside and he sees that, suddenly, all their neighbors are building a huge fence around their house. His mother, knowing what is happening, calls Andy back inside. She herself says that she knows they are not welcome here but that they cannot show weakness. And even though she is trying to shield little Andy away from this, he knows very well what is going on. There were many aspirations for Mayers' neighbors to build a fence. Firstly, it is possible that they do not want to seem welcoming to Mayers because the community backlash was huge, even though they might actually be okay with them. Secondly, there is an angry mob outside the Mayers house almost every night and they maybe just want to shield their property from being damaged (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 39:30-40:10). This scene serves as yet another symbol for isolation. According Loewen (2018), white people in sundown towns isolated themselves from minorities, which was the same as here (see Chapter 3.2).

After this, the two murderers visit Gardener in his office. They start pressuring him into paying them for the murder of his wife. Although it is unclear, it seems as if they had agreed sooner that Gardener would pay them as soon as he gets insurance money. Since the murders saw him at the police station, they are now very suspicious and have the feeling that, in their own words, "Gardner wants to screw them over". Another thing they say to Gardner is that he must silence Nicky. They know that he is the only one who is not on board with the murder and can jeopardize their operation. He tells Gardner that either he silences the kid or he himself will (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 42:10-44:30).

Once again, as seen many times throughout the movie, there is an angry mob shouting at the Mayers house. It is full of men, women and some children too. The mob is getting bigger and bigger as the movie progresses. In the beginning, it is just a few people. Then, as the story progresses, the crowd is getting bigger and is being accompanied by cars and motorcycles. Some even have their radio to play some music, which makes the whole situation seem like an event, rather than a protest. They are singing a song, which resembles work songs of slaves (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 44:30-45:10). These acts of hatred were not uncommon in real life and have a connection to what Loewen (2018, p.1) wrote: "signs that usually said "Nigger, Don't Let the Sun Go Down on You in ____" " (Loewen, 2018), this was, however, not a sign but a song. Yet, the connection is there – both are (some might even say artistic) expressions, which were used to oppress minorities in many sundown towns throughout USA.

Another example of racism is in the next scene, where Mrs. Mayers is in a supermarket and as she is at a check-out, the cashiers, who are Margaret and her supervisor, overcharge her for

each item. Specifically, it was \$20 per each item. They are publicly humiliating her, and many customers are looking at her. She decides to leave the store and as she is walking out of the store, she wants to cry, but just as she taught her son, she never shows weakness in public. Throughout this scene, interestingly, there was a segment of *Crisis in Levittown* playing in the background – one of the interviews, to be specific (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 49:20-50:30). This is another great reminder that even though the Lodge family and the town are fictional, some of the events are not. The residents of sundown towns did their best to keep out minorities.

Now, the story shifts again to Gardner. Once again, he is contacted by the Suburbicon PD. This time, however, he is visited by Lieutenant Hightower in person. Hightower now talks to Gardner suspiciously, saying they found a dead loan shark for the mob who was killed in vehicular. He tells him that they found one of the books and his name was in it. Apparently, Gardner owes \$7,000 to the mob. From the books, however, it is not clear to the policeman whether the \$7,000 is owed by Gardner himself or by a hotel, which has the same name. He says that if he is linked to the mob, it could explain what had happened to his wife (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 53:10-56:20). The policeman mentioned an Italian mob and made a suggestion linking this mob to Rose's murder – once again, this is another example of Suburbicon resident passing blame onto another minority (Italian Americans). In real life, Italian Americans faced discrimination too. Berg (2011, p. 128) writes, that southern Italians, in particular, often had a dark complexion and shiny black hair, and that is why many people questioned their membership in the “white race” (Berg, 2011). Even though *Suburbicon* does not primarily focus on the problematics of other minorities, the involvement of this particular one, especially near the end of the movie, may be a sign of yet another prejudice going around in the American suburbia.

Now, Margaret is greeted by an unpleasant visitor, a man who works for an insurance company. She tells him that she knows nothing of Gardner's affairs and that it would be better for him to simply just wait. He, however, acts very friendly and only after a while reveals that he is a claim investigator and that this claim, indeed, “stinks” and has a bunch of red flags. After a while, he accuses her and Gardner of killing Rose. Prior to that, he was playing with Margaret, telling her that this claim does not “stink”. She chases him out of the house, but he tells her that he will be back in the evening to see Gardner. Little Nicky overhears this conversation and is now quite certain that his mother's murder was planned (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 56:20-1:04:34). Throughout this scene, there is a noise coming from their neighbors, Mayers. There is a man

shouting at Mrs. Mayers: “Get the hell out of here!”, which started the final riot outside their house, finally leading to peace.

There is an angry mob throwing rocks at the Mayers. Next, the mob is demolishing not only their house from distance, but they are also trying to get close. There are around 30 policemen. Yet, they are unable to protect their property. Mayers are running hastily in the house, covering all exits and securing their position, worried for their life. At one point, a Confederate flag is placed on the Mayers house. The flag, of course, symbolizes the American South and its legacy of slavery and hatred. Later, the mob sets their car on fire. Luckily, the Mayers survive this with only property damage. This is the last straw – due to this incident, they had gained a national television attention and are now safe (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 1:12:00-1:13:05).

During the escalation of the riot, there is also an escalation of the Lodge situation. In general, it is very chaotic and fast moving. First, the claims investigator pays them a visit. He tells Gardner straight that he knows this was a fraud. He tells him that either they give him all the insurance money (which was around \$7,000) or he will call the police and have them arrested. He also asks for a cup of coffee. Gardner tries to tell him that it was not a murder. To counter this, investigator tells them that the fact that Gardner is sleeping with Rose’s sister and that he raised insurance on his wife’s death shortly before, there is no debate. Gardner finally agrees with him and asks: “If we did, kill my wife, what makes you think I wouldn’t kill you too?”, investigator, promptly, says that if something happens to a claim investigator on a case like this, their place will be swamped with police and others like him in no time. Around this time, the poison, lye, in his coffee starts kicking in. He starts screaming and choking, little Nicky sees him. The investigator runs out of the house to save his life, but he does not get far, and Gardner kills him on the street. Of course, nobody sees anything, because they are preoccupied with what is happening at the Mayers. Gardner stuffs him in his car and drives him to a nearby secluded place to bury him. He is being followed by another mobster. Nicky contacts his uncle Mitch via telephone. He successfully calls him, but his line is cut by Margaret. She now knows she must kill him too (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 1:04:45-1:16:00).

Just as one mobster is tailgating Gardner, another one enters the house to kill Nicky and Margaret. Margaret, scared to death, picks up some pills and grinds them into powder. This powder is then dissolved into milk and toast for Nicky. Her intention is to poison Nicky so that there are no witnesses. She calmly tells Nicky to come eat and keeps talking about Aruba, saying that it is a Dutch protectorate. The mobster successfully strangles Margaret and is now coming for Nicky. After the initial hide and seek under his bed, Nicky’s hiding techniques are

proven to be insufficient. He is discovered and the mobster tries to kill him. In the final moments, he is saved by his uncle Mitch and remains unharmed. Mitch gives Nicky a gun to defend himself. Nicky hides into a closet and waits for the whole thing to go away. Mitch goes to Nicky's room and makes a phone call. He is delusional, because he does not realize the line is dead. Still, he tries to contact 911, but ends up talking to himself. He dies shortly after. Gardner is returning home. He is being followed by a mobster, but during this, he is killed in a vehicle accident. He, however, hints Gardner that there is a surprise waiting for him at home, Gardner is now aware that his family may be dead. He enters the house and sees the mess. First, he discovers Margaret murdered and then uncle Mitch. Lastly, he finds Nicky hiding in a closet. Nicky has a gun pointed to him, but he does not pull the trigger (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 1:16:00-1:27:00).

Mr. Mayers leaves the house after the riot is over. Fire department is putting water on his car. Devastated, he picks up a Confederate flag and says nothing. There is also a lot of property damage seen in this scene (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 1:27:05-1:27:35).

Now, it is just Nicky and Gardner. During their conversation, Gardner unknowingly starts eating the poisoned toast and milk. He acts very calmly and is not overreacting. He says: "These people are animals. They took everything from us. They took your aunt Maggie, Mitch, your mom. I want you to stay away from that colored boy. You hear me?". Nicky tells him that he knows that he did all this, Gardner gets angry and gives him an ultimatum. The first option is: Nicky is discovered dead by the police and nobody will blame Gardner – he will simply say that the mob just came here to finish their job. Or, the second option is that they get their stories straight and leave this town together, probably to Aruba. He drinks the rest of the milk and the scene ends. We do not know for sure what Nicky's answer was. However, we know that Gardner is dead (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 1:28:00-1:33:15).

The next scene shows the aftermath of the riot. Mayer's house is damaged, their car is burned, and their front lawn is littered with garbage. The Mayers, however, are not alone cleaning it. They are also helped by a several other residents, while the house is surrounded by policemen and army to protect them. There are cameras everywhere, as this incident had gained a nationwide attention. Many people are being interviewed. An elderly lady is on the camera and she explains in great detail all the terrible things that had happened in Suburbicon. She adds: "None of this ever happened before the Mayers moved here." (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 1:33:45-1:34:45). Other people interviewed are repeating lines from 1950s documentary called Crisis in Levittown. The first man is talking about the rumors he had heard about the Mayers (Meyers)

moving in, saying they were funded by third party groups such as NAACP, Jews and Reds (*Suburbicon*, 2017,1:33:45-1:34:45).

There is a shot on Nicky watching this interview on TV. He switches to another channel to a woman saying she moved here because it was a white community. There is a shot on dead Gardner laying on the table. Nicky switches to cartoon instead and watches TV, ignoring all the dead people in his house. He goes outside after a while, picks up a glove and approaches the Mayers house. He and Andy greet each other and immediately start playing ball. The movie is ending with a scene of Andy and Nicky throwing ball, in the middle of a highly racist, raging town of Suburbicon, with not a care in the world. Even though they are both different races, they do not care about this. They care about each other. They are simply friends and that is it (*Suburbicon*, 2017, 1:34:45-1:37:00).

Despite its bad ratings, George Clooney did a great job directing this movie. For some, who know the history of Levittown, this movie painted a pretty and realistic picture of the discrimination situation. However, for those who do not know the history, some parts may confuse them. An average viewer is likely to only focus on the Lodge family and overlook the Mayers family, as they did not contribute to the fate of the main characters in any way – besides Andy, of course. Seeing simple scenes such as outraged people in the city hall, riots in front of Mayers house, prejudice neighbors and discrimination in a supermarket, this movie depicts 1950s discrimination perfectly.

If there is one thing this movie excelled in, it was in delivering facts in a subtle way. Through having some names fictionalized, such as Suburbicon instead of Levittown and Mayers instead of Meyers, this movie does not seem like a historical film, but it paints of a good picture of racism.

5. Depiction of racism in *Crisis in Levittown*

In this chapter, I will be focusing on the depiction of racism in movie *Crisis in Levittown*. I will mostly be focusing on the mentality of residents and interpret them both individually and generally. My main source for this chapter will be *Crisis in Levittown* (1957) by Dan W. Dodson produced by Dynamic Films, Inc. Individual interviews will be cited with a timestamp. At the end, I will compare my findings to other sources to demonstrate whether people interviewed in fact represented the community as a whole or not.

Crisis in Levittown (1957) is a documentary focused on the topic of racism in a newly built community of Levittown. Professor Dan W. Dodson is the movie's commentator and analyst. The movie introduces us to a town called Levittown in Pennsylvania. Located between New Jersey and Trenton, this community has over 60,000 people. Levittown is a very developed city with its own shopping centers, services, churches, community centers, etc.

With a string of interviews, this documentary focuses on its main topic – the integration of the first African American family. As written by Gans (2017, p.383), this was after 6 years of Levittown's existence (Gans, 2017). The Meyers family unwillingly caused a lot of disturbance in the community. Whilst some sympathized with them, there were groups that were not so welcoming. Amongst those who opposed, there was a small portion of those who inclined towards violence. This was mostly due to Levittown's 6-year status as an all-white community, because, as demonstrated later, this was one of the aspirations for moving in.

This documentary provides both visual and audial testimonials of citizens. Nine citizens were interviewed on camera. Many other citizens were heard at the end of this documentary, but their commentary was secondary. Out of all the 9 people visually interviewed, four of them had a positive attitude towards the integration of colored people. Four of them (a woman and then a group of three women) had a negative attitude towards this integration. The last person interviewed had a neutral attitude – he was very realistic and made some good points from both sides without any prejudice.

Seven out of nine interviewed were women. The vast majority of women in 1950s were housewives and housewives spent a lot of time visiting each other – according to a table by Gans (2017, p.157), visiting next-door neighbors was very frequent in Levittown- specifically, most frequent were the visits of next-door neighbors and across-the-street neighbors (Gans, 2017), this potentially led to exchanging opinions and gossips. And rumors played a major role

in this issue. As stated by several people interviewed, it was rumored that the Meyers family was supported by third parties. Some believed it was NAACP, some believed it was the “reds” (communists) or Jews. These rumors, unproven to be true, caused a hysteria in the community. It also led to exaggeration and increased sensitivity.

Children were not interviewed here but their ideas were projected through their mothers. One mother said that the colored kids ganged up on her son and beat him up quite frequently – which was not proven to be true. Another mother said her daughter came home from school crying, asking her if she must marry an African American. This supported another rumor in the community, as some believed that intermarriage was a mean for African Americans to achieve equality.

Interview I (*Crisis in Levittown*, 1957, 3:40-6:20)

The first woman held a positive attitude towards the first African American family moving in. She, in her own words, was terribly shocked to find that there were people in this community who were so violently opposed to it.

When the interviewer asked: “Was the community prepared in any way for the entrance of the first Negro family into all-white Levittown?”, she replied: “Well there was an attempt by group of ministers who formed a group called the Human Relations Council and they were just getting started on their work. I don't know how they expected to ultimately accomplish the purpose of educating everyone, but I know that they had an open forum one time and just within the last day or four months and the results of it were published in the paper.”

When the interviewer further asked her on whether she felt that this was effective, she said it was not, feeling that it was just a drop in the bucket. She also complained about the limited outreach of this article. Another follow-up question was about rumors. The woman admits that she had heard many of them. It was rumored that an outside group had deliberately moved the Meyers family in and that they were sponsored and paid by from the same group to do this thing. Ending the interview, she says she has great faith in facts. She believes the community will learn them and find out that there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of

Interview II (*Crisis in Levittown*, 1957, 6:41-10:45)

The second person interviewed is a woman. On the question of why she chose to move to Levittown she replied: “We were looking for a place to buy a home. We looked at Levittown and we liked the homes here; we liked the advantages that Levittown seem to offer in

comparison to other cities and we understood that it was going to be all-white. We were very happy to buy a home here.” Later, she says that they try to keep the Meyers discussion away from children, stating they are too young to understand this.

On the question of whether she thinks the “Negro” family moving here will affect the community as a whole, she replied that the property values will surely go down. This theory was based on her own experience from living in Washington D.C.

Another thing that concerned this woman was integration. She said that Mr. Meyer’s house had been anything but peaceful since he had moved in. She said that he lives in an illusion thinking his three children will be accepted socially. She fears mixed marriages and says that the only way for integration of African Americans is better education and bettering themselves.

When the interviewer said that they are others that are for the Meyers, she replied: “Yes I've heard about them.” Interviewer asked: “For what reason do you think do they support the Meyers?” Again, she replied: “Frankly I don't know what reasons they can have for it. If they are homeowners in Levittown, I don't see what reasons they can have for it.” The interviewer asked her what course of action she was going to follow. “I'll do what I can to help to get them out legally and peacefully and as far as accepting them socially if that's what you mean I could never do that.”

Interview III (*Crisis in Levittown*, 1957, 11:05-14:15)

The third person interviewed was a younger woman. Her attitude towards the Meyers family was positive, she was very rational and open-minded. She, also, admitted hearing many rumors about the first African American family coming in. However, she has high ideals of her community - when she was asked whether the Meyers family could live her comfortably, she replied yes.

Interviewer: “Do you think the Meyers staying in Levittown will affect property values?”

Woman: “I don't think that the Myers have anything to do with the property decreasing or increasing I think it's purely a white problem not a Negro problem.” ... “I think it is the feeling of the majority group which will influence the property not the minority group.”

She also stated that she does not believe that the Meyers family moving in will cause many African Americans to follow them.

She also made a very good point when she said that the only way to end this housing segregation problem is when there will be no more white only communities.

Interview IV (*Crisis in Levittown*, 1957, 14:40-17:05)

A woman is again interviewed. Her first concern were her children and the way this situation negatively affects them. She also said that one of her best friends as a child was an African American girl. Her friend became a registered nurse and does her best for her children. She wanted them to grow up in a safe, healthy atmosphere. In general, she sympathized with the Meyers family.

Furthermore, she mentioned that the color of skin does not determine whether she will befriend a person or not. Once again, she confessed to hearing rumors. However, she was concerned that the whole purpose of Meyers family moving in was to attract more African Americans into all-white communities all over the nation. She, however, believes that if they do come here and comply with rules, live peacefully, she has nothing against it. This was a good example of how African Americans were looked at – by many people (not only those interviewed here), they were seen as problematic and criminal, even.

Interview V (*Crisis in Levittown*, 1957, 17:20-20:57)

A group of three women were interviewed. All of them had strong opinions towards integration.

One of the women had no contact with colored people in her life up till waiting for her house to be built. In this period, she lived in Trenton. Working alongside colored people and commuting to work through their neighborhoods, she was very happy to be moving into an all-white Levittown.

The second woman also raised her concerns. “Never before in our house was anything mentioned pro or con about colored people because I feel that they have to be in contact with them to a certain extent and why should their minds be prejudiced. But since they have moved here, they have heard remarks and well, I'm afraid to say I'm going to dislike the idea. There were colored children in the school my son attended last year for the first time and he often came home and said there had been trouble between them.”

Another woman shared her opinion too: “My boy, he likes sports and he used to get down there every Saturday with the two of the boys from the neighborhood and there was an argument occurred, something real silly. My boy and the colored boy got in an argument. Well from that

time on, for the whole remainder of the summer the boy was afraid to get down there because the colored boys got a gang together and every time, they would get near my Jimmy they would beat the devil out of him. I went to the principal and everything.” She then she expressed her concerns about the two colored teachers in Levittown, saying this is a good example of what is going to happen. She believes more and more African Americans will be moving into Levittown. She said that if more colored people move in, she will move out, as she does not wish to be associated with them.

Another woman said she does not think that colored people should be oppressed but that she moved here because it was a white community. And if she has to leave Levittown, to move to another all-white community, she will do so.

Interview VI (*Crisis in Levittown*, 1957, 21:15-23:35)

The next person interviewed was a man. He was happy about the Meyers moving in and to see Levittown become more of an American community. His ideas on those opposing Meyers were as following: he said that with Levittown having over 60,000 people and the mob only being around 500 to 600 people, they do not represent the community as a whole. Going to a supermarket at night, he would meet thousands of people. This being a large number compared to the mobs, he definitely has high hopes for integration in Levittown.

He is not sure whether Meyers will attract more African Americans moving in. He is, however, sure that Meyers will be able to live here comfortably after some time. He shed some additional light on the rumors spread. He said that he had heard that the NAACP, Reds and Jews were behind it, these rumors were mostly a result of hysteria.

To the question “What course do you think the future of Levittown will take?” he responded: “I’ll tell you, I don’t think Levittown’s an isle, it’s part of the USA and I think it’s going to integrate like the rest of this country’s going to integrate.

Interview VII (*Crisis in Levittown*, 1957, 23:55-26:04)

The last person interviewed was also a man. He had mixed feelings towards Meyers moving in. He had a business-like approach, stating that in his line of work, there is no discrimination - whoever has credit or cash can purchase a car and is not limited to religion or race. The moving of Meyers had not affected his homelife, he said.

On the other hand, he expressed his concerns in the following scene. “The average white person living in Levittown has four to five children while, let’s put it this way. If the Levittown

is migrated in hordes of Negroes, which they have a right to come here, but if something that happens, that way, pretty soon, my neighbor will be having a Negro son-in-law or a daughter-in-law. How would that look?" "It's a proven fact that those mixed communities are over a third empty, he could have stayed there. He had a beautiful home there. The only reason that Mr. Meyers came into Levittown is to show people they could get here. It wasn't that he wanted to come to Levittown, but my personal opinion is this, there is something bigger behind this.

In conclusion, this documentary provided viewers with an insight into suburban mentality. To which extent the residents represented Levittown's community as a whole is a question, to which there is no easy answer. However, there are multiple sources and information which support Levittown's racist history and problems with integration. Gans (2017, p.37) writes, that there were many aspirations for moving to Levittown. Only 4% have checked racial change in the neighborhood as a primary aspiration and other 20% checked it as one of the reasons amongst many (Gans, 2017). And the outrage seen throughout the documentary was, in many ways, justified. Firstly, over 20% of citizens came to live here in an all-white community. It was under Levitt's promise, Gans (2017, p.380), that Levitt would only sell to white people: "Levitt announced right from the start that he would go along with local "customs" and would not sell to Negroes, thus once again inviting court action and demonstrations by local pro-integration organizations." (Gans, 2017). By this, we can see two facts related to this documentary. First being, Levitt promised citizens an all-white community. Second, there were pro-integration organizations. So, in many ways, real life Levittown did represent the majority of citizens – the documentary portrayed both people pro and against integration, and also mentioned the riots (which were radicals, presumably the 4% buyers). The fears of those against integration became true. Gans (2017, p.379) stated that by the year 1964, that is 7 years later, the number of "Negro families" was estimated to be around 50. Yet, no one knew or seemed to care about the exact number (Gans, 2017).

So, was all the controversy behind the moving in of the first African American family justifiable? Yes and no. From all the points stated previously, the white citizens of Levittown had the right to live in an all-white community (it was even promised to them). When looking at this event from a 1950s perspective, all the riots and property damage was justifiable. But when looking at the events from today's perspective, it was not. William Myers Jr. and his family were pioneers and heroes. They went into an all-white community fearlessly despite all the backlash. By doing so, they allowed many more African Americans to move in – sure, Levittown for many years remained predominately white, but it was a step forward. Without

their actions, the advancement of African Americans would have been much slower. There is no concrete evidence to whether the mentality of citizens had changed over the years, as Crisis in Levittown is one of its kind and there was no other documentary like filmed later.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to research the development of American suburbia, racism in American suburbia and its impact today, both in American culture and in movies and literature. Another aim was to investigate USA's involvement in these racist policies (also known as institutional racism). Many findings were expected, but some were shocking. My primary aim, to investigate the development of American suburbia, racism in American suburbia and its impact today, both in American culture and in movies and literature, was accomplished. Other aim, to investigate USA's involvement in these racist policies, also known as institutional racism, was also accomplished. These were, as stated previously, Jim Crow laws and other laws which gave realtors the right not to sell houses to African Americans.

The history of racism in the United States was a theoretical part, which was based on various sources. This chapter gave the reader an insight into the development and how it was linked to racism in suburbia.

The next chapter dealt with the history of racism in American suburbia. It stated the reasons behind post-war suburbanization, important terms, history of Levittown, life and discrimination in it.

The following chapter was aimed on analyzing a movie made by George Clooney, *Suburbicon*. This movie was not primarily centered around racism, but there were some interesting points and scenes. It, however, did a great job with portraying how suburbs looked in the 1950s.

In the last chapter, I analyzed the depiction of racism in *Crisis in Levittown*. This documentary, despite being only thirty minutes long, was enriching the most. With a string of interviews, this movie gave a valuable insight into the mentality of suburbs.

The fourth and the fifth chapters were interconnected. There were clear links between both of these movies. In many ways, *Suburbicon* did a good job depicting racism on American suburbia, despite being fictionalized and secondary. *Crisis in Levittown* was much better in terms of facts and genuine insight into suburban mentality. To summarize this, *Suburbicon* is better suited for someone not looking into this problematic too thoroughly, as it only paints a picture without providing the viewer with facts. *Crisis in Levittown*, however, delivered facts precisely and genuinely, hence being suitable for a viewer with specific interest in suburban

racism. Both *Suburbicon* and *Crisis in Levittown* did a great job in that matter – the target audience is different and that is a deciding factor.

Overall, racism on American suburbia was a big problem from the very beginning. Many things contributed to this – laws, the demand of free market and many others. It is needed to note, that not all people were opposed to integration (as demonstrated in Chapter 5) and were not racist. Despite this, African Americans faced housing discrimination, nonetheless. Whether the impact of 1950s policies still affect today's American suburbs, is unclear. As my research suggests, there are still some predominately white towns in America, but it is unclear, whether minorities are forbidden to live there or whether they choose not to. Many articles state that minorities face housing and mortgage discrimination even nowadays, despite being illegal. In summary, racism in American suburbia in the past and present are two different things. There are still some unpleasant disadvantages for African Americans, but they are nowhere near as serious and obvious, as they were in the past, primarily in the 1950s. This demonstrates the development of society, fair laws and equality.

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Resumé

Tato práce se zabývá tématem rasismus na Americkém předměstí a je rozdělena do 4 hlavních kapitol – historie rasismu v USA, historie předměstí a vyobrazení rasismu ve filmu *Suburbicon* a vyobrazení rasismu v dokumentu *Crisis in Levittown*.

Kapitola 2 nabídne čtenáři komplexní znalosti v oblasti vývoje rasismu v USA. Jsou zde vytýčeny důležité historické milníky – začátky USA, obchod s otroky, doba před a po občanské válce, situace velké migrace Afroameričanů a jejich podmínky pro život v Chicagu a vývoj rasismu po druhé světové válce. Zde se práce zaměřuje na Afroamerická hnutí za občanská práva (Civil Rights Movement) a události, které přispěly k rovnoprávnosti Afroameričanů – vražda Emmetta Tilla, biografie Martina Luthera Kinga, atentát na 16th street Baptist Church, bojkot autobusové dopravy v Montgomery, slavný proslov „Mám sen“ od Martina Luthera Kinga a jeho vražda. V kapitole 2.6 je pak shrnuta dnešní situace a zmíněno, jaký vliv mají v dnešní době sociální sítě na občanská práva Afroameričanů.

Třetí kapitola se pak již věnuje specificky historii amerického předměstí a rasismu v něm. Individuální podkapitoly se pak věnují rozdílným tématům. Jako první se zaměřuje na důvody pro poválečnou suburbanizaci. Dále jsem se pak zaměřil na definice termínu „White Flight“ a „Sundown Towns“. Další podkapitola obsahuje historii předměstí Levittownu, které slouží jako nejlepší příklad k reprezentaci tohoto tématu. Dále se pak práce zaměřuje také na život v Levittownu, konkrétněji na sousedské vztahy, komunitní centra, aj. Další kapitola se věnuje diskriminaci minorit v Levittownu a poslední podkapitola se věnuje zákonům a jejich dopadu na rasový vývoj v Levittownu.

Čtvrtá kapitola se zabývá vyobrazením rasismu ve filmu *Suburbicon* z roku 2017, který režíroval George Clooney. Tento film je situován ve fiktivním městečku Suburbicon, který reprezentuje Levittown; tudíž čtvrtá kapitola navazuje na třetí. Mimo pozmeněné jméno města, je zde i pozmeněné jméno první Afroamerické rodiny, která se do tohoto „bílého“ města nastěhovala a stala se první minoritou a čelila mnoha nepokojům, vzpourám, diskriminaci a mnoho dalšímu. Jméno této rodiny bylo ve filmu Mayers – ve skutečnosti to bylo Myers. Jelikož tento děj byl ve filmu sekundární, zaměřil jsem se i na rodinu hlavního hrdinu (Gardnera Lodge) a jeho rodiny. Jediný element, který děj hlavní rodiny a rodiny sekundární spojuje, byl syn rodiny Lodge, Nicholas. Ve filmu bylo zobrazeno mnoho reálných události, kterými byly, jak už bylo výše uvedeno, demonstrace, nepokoje, vzpoury a diskriminace.

Pátá kapitola se zabývá vyobrazením rasismu v dokumentu *Crisis in Levittown*. Tento dokument pochází z roku 1957 a je to série rozhovorů s občany města Levittown na téma integrace, tedy nastěhování první Afroamerické rodiny, jíž byla, jak již výše uvedeno, rodina Myers. Na kameře bylo tázáno celkem devět občanů a každý měl rozdílný názor – někteří z nich byli pro integraci, přičemž někteří byli proti. Dokument je z doby, kdy se o žádné politické korektnosti nehovořilo – alespoň ne v takové míře, jako dnes. Z tohoto důvodu byly rozhovory otevřené a upřímné. Důsledkem toho pak bylo kvalitní nahlédnutí do mentality občanů a pochopení jejich důvodů pro a proti integraci.

Ve finální kapitole, šesté, jsem pak shrnul všechny kapitoly a také jsem porovnal spojitosti mezi filmem *Suburbicon* a dokumentem *Crisis in Levittown*. Zmínil jsem cíle práce a jejich výsledky. Zde jsem zmínil to, že rasismus na americkém předměstí, hlavně v počátcích, byl velký problém, k čemuž přispívalo mnoho faktorů, jako např. zákony, poptávka na volném trhu, aj. Zmínil jsem však, že ne všichni lidé byli rasisté a proti integraci. Navzdory tomu však i dnes Afroameričané čelí diskriminaci při pořizování bydlení a hypoték, jak naznačují mnohé články. Dále jsem zmínil, že ačkoli i v dnešní době existují převážně „bílá“ města, nelze dokázat, zdali je to způsobeno diskriminací, nebo se minority do těchto měst přestěhovat jednoduše nechtějí. Ke shrnutí této situace jsem podotkl to, že ačkoli Afroameričané čelí různým nevýhodám na dnešním předměstí, nejsou tak zjevné a drastické, jak tomu bylo v začátcích, tedy v 50. letech.

Jako hlavní metody pro výzkum jsem používal odbornou publikaci – primárně knihy od Herberta J. Ganse (*The Levittowners*) a Jamese W. Loewena (*Sundown Towns*), které se problematikou rasismu na americkém předměstí detailně zabývaly. Jako další metody pro výzkum byly internetové články, jako např. biografie významných osob, popis historických událostí, aj. Mou poslední metodou výzkumu pak byla analýza filmu *Suburbicon* a dokumentu *Crisis in Levittown*. Tyto analýzy jsem pak však propojil s mým primárním zdrojem, tedy knihami *The Levittowners* a *Sundown Towns*.

ANOTACE

Jméno a příjmení:	Tomáš Novák
Katedra:	Ústav cizích jazyků
Vedoucí práce:	Mgr. Jiří Flajšar, Ph.D.
Rok obhajoby:	2020

Název práce:	Rasismus na americkém předměstí: Příběhy z historie a filmu
Název v angličtině:	Racism in American Suburbia: Narratives in History and Film
Anotace práce:	Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá problematikou rasismu na americkém předměstí. Cílem práce je prozkoumat tyto jevy. Tato práce byla rozdělena do čtyř kapitol. První kapitola se zabývá historií rasismu v USA, druhá kapitola se zabývá historií rasismu na americkém předměstí, třetí kapitola se zabývá vyobrazením rasismu ve filmu <i>Suburbicon</i> a čtvrtá kapitola se zabývá vyobrazením rasismu v dokumentu <i>Crisis in Levittown</i> .
Klíčová slova:	Rasismus, rasismus v USA, americké předměstí, <i>Suburbicon</i> , <i>Crisis in Levittown</i> .
Anotace v angličtině:	As the title suggests, this bachelor thesis is dealing with racism in American suburbia and its narratives in history and film. This bachelor thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is dealing with history of racism in the United States. The second chapter is dealing with history of racism in American suburbia. The third chapter is dealing with depiction of racism in movie <i>Suburbicon</i> and the fourth chapter is dealing with racism in documentary <i>Crisis in Levittown</i> .
Klíčová slova v angličtině:	Racism, racism in the United States, suburbia, history of suburbs, American suburbs, <i>Suburbicon</i> , <i>Crisis in Levittown</i> .
Přílohy vázané v práci:	
Rozsah práce:	35
Jazyk práce:	Angličtina