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**Historical and Literary Origins of the Black Lives Matter Movement**

**Abstract:**

The purpose of this academic paper is to analyze and understand the history of racism, its origins and its reason for being. The importance of this study is that racism is today a serious problem that is claiming several lives. Understanding its origins is essential to achieve a society in which this mentality has been completely eradicated and deconstructed. Beginning in the 15th century with the arrival of the first Europeans in Africa, the theme of the slave trade, the discovery of America and the first movements for the liberation of slaves will be discussed. Once the history of the era of segregation and its liberation in the United States has been recounted, the evolution of the Black Lives Matter fight will be analyzed and with it, the events in America with the George Floyd affair and the BLM demonstrations. Slavery, abolitionism and its origins in the Quaker community, segregation, civil war, and the institutionalized racism in which we live today will be analyzed. Mentions of the stories known as "slave narratives," will also be included. Thus, it has

been concluded that racism has been a part of the modern world for centuries. It has shaped much of what today's society is, so getting rid of it will be a difficult task, but very necessary.

Key words: Slavery, Trade, Slave Narratives, Abolitionism, Racism, Black Lives Matter.

## **0. Introduction.**

The Black Lives Matter movement (generally abbreviated in the acronym BLM) is a campaign originated in 2013 in the United States of America after the assassination of Trayvon Martin. Martin was a seventeen-year-old black boy whose killer, George Zimmerman, was found innocent due to the internalized racism of the jury, and it was this injustice that started the BLM movement. According to Patrisse Cullors, one of the three co-founders of the BLM organisation, "Black Lives Matter really starts because there is a generation of us desperate for something different, and while the Obama administration for many of us was like, *this is the opportunity to finally have those real conversations*, instead people was like, *racism is over, you got your black president*, and then Trayvon Martin was killed" ("Six Years Strong").

However, racism in the US did not start with the murder of this teenager; it is an institutionalised issue that starts even before the European arrival to America. This essay's purpose is to analyse the historical origins of this discrimination and its literary recordings, for those who may not understand the necessity of a political and social movement that defends black citizens.

## **1. Slavery in Africa.**

As Farhad Malekian wrote in his book *Principles of Islamic International Criminal Law: A Comparative Search* (2011), "slavery is one of the oldest institutions practised by almost all nations in the world" (225). Therefore, slavery has been a common practice during most part of the history of humanity. According to Susan E. Klarlund, even if the Hellenistic Empire was the first one in entering Western Europe, they did not start a slavery system based on racial factors. The Roman Empire started owning slaves, but these "did not hold a racial stigma" (S. Klarlund 86), they were war prisoners who had to work in order to buy their freedom. Consequently, they would become full citizens with the same rights as every other Roman citizen.

Even after the fall of the Roman Empire, no racial discrimination was appreciated in Europe, and during the Middle Ages, the "main divisions of people were Christian and non-Christian" (S. Klarlund 87). However, this religious separation laid the groundwork for what later would become racism. It was during the 15th century that the Portuguese people started exploring Africa to find new resources, and there they met the black men and women.

The Portuguese explorers saw these African people as inferior since they were not Christians, and they started a Christianization campaign. This purpose of converting the black Africans into Christianity ended up starting racial discrimination, since:

Their obsession with the spiritual conversion allowed the negroes to be integrated into the

general population. ... A dominant group would have to devise ways to limit the subgroups' (minority) cultural assimilation to profitably exploit them. As long as the Portuguese assimilated the "heathens" into their population, race prejudice was inhibited. (S. Klarlund 87)

This means that the process of Christianization originated social distinctions between the people that already believed in God, who happened to be white, and the people who did not believe, who happened to be black. Later on, this racial distinction of seeing black people as outsiders and barbarians would lose its Christian aspect and became a matter exclusively of race.

Once Europe and Africa met, the devastation of the latter started. As previously mentioned, the Europeans travelled to this continent to look for resources and, as Dr. Hakim Adi wrote in his journal for the BBC, "Africa was impoverished by its relationship with Europe while the human and other resources that were taken from Africa contributed to the capitalist development and wealth of Europe and other parts of the world" ("Africa and the Transatlantic Slave Trade"). Europe and the wealthy merchants of Africa signed a trade by which African people could be enslaved "as punishment for a crime, as payment for a family debt, or most commonly of all, by being captured as prisoners of war" (H. Adi).

The European arrival to America meant the origin of a new emerging business, the plantations. The professor at the University of Maryland, Ira Berlin, wrote that:

In the middle of the fifteenth century, Europe, Africa, and the Americas came together, creating—among other things—a new economy. At the center of that economy was the plantation, an enterprise dedicated to the production of exotic commodities—the most prominent being sugar—for a distant market". No freeworker wanted to labour the sugar plantations, since that work was "brutal and dangerous—literally killing." (I. Berlin)

Therefore, the owners of the plantations started buying African slaves for that purpose. As a consequence of this dehumanization suffered by black slaves, the slave narratives appeared. A slave narrative is "an account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally" (W. L. Andrews). Scilicet, it is a narrative expression in the form of a personal diary in which the slave recounts the reality that he or she suffers every day.

One of the most representative slave narratives is the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), written in two volumes. It is an autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, a black man who was born in the city of Essaka (nowadays in Nigeria), and who was kidnapped and sold into slavery at the age of eleven. Thanks to his writings, it is known that, after the kidnapping, Olaudah Equiano was taken to the West, before he was moved to Virginia. There, a Sea Captain bought him, and that brought him the opportunity to get an education. He finally bought his freedom in 1766 (W.L. Andrews), at the

age of 21.

Once Equiano was set free, he became an active abolitionist. His works got published with the help of some British abolitionists who used their privileges to give voice to the slaves by collecting their writings (W. L. Andrews). Multiple other black men and women then started writing their own slave narratives, in order to spread the word and raise awareness among the white population about what was happening to the black community. Some of the most remarkable slave narratives are *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass (1845); *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, by Harriet Jacobs (1861); or *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself*, by William Wells Brown (1847).

## **2. Slavery in America.**

The European explorers arrived in America without a concrete plan of action. As Philip D. Morgan wrote, "no European nation embarked on New World ventures with the intention of enslaving anyone. They had no blueprint, but rather proceeded haphazardly and pragmatically" (52). However, as soon as the Europeans arrived in the Americas, they began to exploit the natives' labour force. This enslavement and exploitation came to the point in which the explorers had to keep advancing and enslaving more and more people during the 16th century, as the workforce of the first Indians they crossed paths with began to decline, which is why they took over and enslaved more than fifty thousand Natives of Central America, present-day Peru, Panama and the Caribbean (53).

One of the first "abolitionists" of slavery was the Spanish Queen Isabel "The Catholic." According to Antonio Rumeu de Armas in his book *The Indigenous Policy of Isabel the Catholic* (1969), a royal declaration was published on the 20th of September of 1477 in which the queen stated that the African aborigines brought from the Canary Islands should not be treated as slaves because they were Catholic people, and therefore, subjects of the Crown (197–199). However, as it is written in this same book, some of these Christian African people were kidnapped and enslaved against the orders of the kings and, as a response, the monarchs published some laws in order to punish these criminal activities.

This historical event demonstrates that the Spanish crown was positioned against enslaving other human beings. Moreover, it highlights that Queen Isabel intended to protect Africans who had been evangelised. On the other hand, the attitude that the Spanish crown adopted on the issue of the American Indians must be addressed. According to Rumeu de Armas (157), the Native Americans had a different destiny than, for example, the Canaries, since the Catholic Monarchs went to the Vatican to recognize America as a part of the Castilian crown. In the previous conquests in the Atlantic, the Castilian crown had not turned to the Church for it to recognise its rights over these new territories, therefore, the actions that had been carried out involved only occupation, and left the issue of Aboriginal rights completely on the sidelines. Thus "if the crown had followed the same procedure carried out in these Atlantic territories, the freedom

of the indigenous would have remained in a difficult situation" (128).

As Rumeu de Armas wrote, when Queen Isabel and King Fernando visited the Pope, they had to deal with the problem of Portugal, which alluded to its rights that had been affirmed by the Pope long ago. The *bull Inter Caetera* (a document in which the Pope allowed the monarchs to send missionaries to evangelise the American continent) finally reflected the new missionary character of the Spanish expeditions (40–41).

This bull, however, did not mention the issue of slavery. On a first moment, the Spanish monarchs authorised the sale of a few Indian slaves. Nevertheless, the monarchs thought it would be convenient to find out if these Indians could and should be sold as slaves. They surrounded themselves with lawyers, theologians, and other experts on the different aspects of human nature to deal with the issue. This commission made the decision that the American people were humans with a soul and therefore they should be set free. The freedom of the Indians was declared, by the royal certificate on June 20, 1500 (40–42).

Afterwards, in 1523 the King Charles I of Spain established the Encomienda system, which was an organization implemented by the Spanish conquerors during the colonization in America in order to exploit native work. It consisted of the conveyance of a group of Indians to a Spaniard with the objective that he could instruct and evangelise them (Pelotazzo). That is to say, the Encomienda consisted of Spanish men who "adopted" some Native American people in order to educate and evangelize them in exchange for the payment of certain taxes that normally consisted of work instead of wealth.

Multiple barbarities were performed by the Europeans, and some of them were written down and described by Fray Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish Dominican friar who fought against the mistreatment of Native Americans. In his work, *From The Very Brief Relation of The Devastation of The Indies* (1552), he wrote that:

They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water "Boil there, you offspring of the devil!" ... They made some low wide gallons on which the hanged victim's feet almost touched the ground, stringing up their victims in lots of thirteen in memory of Our Redeemer and His Twelve Apostles, then set burning wood at their feet and thus burned them alive. (37)

Nevertheless, the moral issue of enslaving the natives was not so clear at that time. Multiple debates had taken place after the European arrival to the American continent and the successive enslavement of its inhabitants. For example, in 1548, in Spain, Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés Sepúlveda had an important debate on the topic (Pelotazzo), and as another example, the Spanish Queen Isabel "The Catholic" stated on numerous occasions that the Americans should not be enslaved (A. R. De Armas 40–42).

Bartolomé de las Casas, as it has been mentioned before, was a Spanish friar, belonging to the Dominican order. Originally, he participated in the Encomienda system and the enslavement of the Native Americans, but eventually he realized that as Queen Isabelle did, due to his faith, he could not consent to the mistreatment suffered by these people. Therefore, in 1515 he set free all of his slaves and pleaded in front of King Charles I of Spain advocating for the rights of the natives (Pelotazzo). Furthermore, Bartolomé de las Casas ended up becoming the official protector of the Indias. He argued that the American people were "subjects and vassals" (293–294) of the Spanish Crown, and that because of that status they should enjoy the same rights as white Spaniards and be evangelised without the intervention of any Encomienda (Pelotazzo).

This Dominican friar travelled to the New World, where he saw the violence executed against the Native people. Later on, he travelled back to Spain in order to enlist more missionaries, and continued fighting for the rights of the American people. Finally, he achieved a great victory with the publication of the New Laws in 1542. These New Laws, according to Esteban Mira Caballos, although they did not definitively stop slavery, slowed down the slave trade and caused a change in the status of the American Indians, who went from being slaves to being servants (95–97).

### **3. Abolition in America.**

#### **3.1. Origins of the Abolitionist movement.**

The abolition movement was originally led by the Quakers, "a Christian religious group that meets without any formal ceremony and is strongly opposed to violence and war" (Oxford Dictionary). As Ryan P. Murray, from the Southeastern University, stated in his work *Quakers and Slavery: The Development of an Antislavery Society* (2015), there are two main characteristics of the Quaker understanding of religion: "pacifism and simple living" (13). Quakerism is a religion in which one of the most important values is peace, non-violence. Accordingly, its followers did not take long to oppose the dehumanization suffered by the slaves.

However, as Professor Murray points out, at first the Quakers did not oppose to slavery and that "groups of men and women would even preach on the matter" (15), meaning that some Quakers even promoted slavery. This, nevertheless, ended up turning into something positive, since it was seeing first-hand the atrocities suffered by slaves what made the Quaker community so aware of the problem (15). Seeing the humiliation and cruelty with which the slaves were treated made many Quakers aware that their religion of peace and love could not tolerate this situation.

There were, as mentioned, some men and women who positioned themselves in opposition to slavery. As Ryan P. Murray wrote, the first protest against slavery in America took place in 1688, in the city of Germantown, where some men met together in order to write a paper in which they "condemn[ed] the practice of slavery" (18). These men were Quakers, and one of the reasons why they were against slavery was their religious faith, since one of the Jesus' teachings was "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12). This protest was key in the evolution of Antislavery Quakerism, since these protests spawned a generation of truly anti-slave

Quakers who weren't afraid to link their names to their ideals (R. P. Murray 19).

These first Antislavery Quakers laid the groundwork for the next generation of abolitionists, which according to Murray lived around 1740–1800 (21). Among the many abolitionists in the Society of Friends (Quakers), two names stand out, Anthony Benezet and John Woolman; this section of the essay will focus on the latter.

John Woolman was a Quaker preacher who was part of the second generation of Antislavery Quakers. As Murray wrote, throughout his travels, he encountered quakers who had decided to free their slaves, others who declared that they did not see the need to own slaves, Quakers who put aside their religious beliefs in pursuit of slave aid, and within the latter group, some who felt remorse for enslaving other human beings (24). Woolman, across his religious journeys, listened to all of these positions on slavery, in order to create his own critical opinion. Finally, he considered it to be “a terrible practice” (23).

It was in his second journey that he visited the South, and after this trip, he wrote his work *Some Considerations on the Keeping of the Negroes Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination*, in 1754. As John S. Lask wrote, in this text the author recognises and exposes the equity of all humanity in the eyes of God, the “equity of the Golden Rule” (35). Woolman said that all humans are equals in the eyes of God, and therefore, buying and mistreating the slaves was an atrocity, since the Golden Rule claims that you must treat others in the way you would like to be treated (Woolman 200–204).

Woolman’s writings became incredibly influential among Quakers, but it did not come down to that influence. Phillips P. Moulton wrote in his book *The Influence of the Writings of John Woolman* in 1971 that “although Woolman's influence was primarily among Quakers, it extended through them to the antislavery movement as a whole” (6). As Moulton states, it was Anthony Benezet who broadly spread Woolman’s writings, making him become a reference of abolitionism both inside and outside the Quaker community (6).

To sum up, the Quakers’ view of religion and understanding of the Scriptures made them become a key point in the “fight” against slavery. It is John Woolman who has been used as an example in this essay of a Quaker man who came to this conclusion, that the belief that all humans are creatures of God, and the understanding that all men and women are equal under His eyes, is not compatible with the system of buying and selling slaves. The Quakers’ writings, although they did not end slavery, were undoubtedly a useful means of raising awareness on this topic among the white population.

### **3.2. Evolution of Abolitionism.**

The Quaker Anthony Benezet founded in 1775 the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, also known as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. This was the first American society against slavery, as Richard S. Newman wrote in his article *The Pennsylvania Abolition Society: Restoring a Group to Glory*. The members of this group were dedicated both to preserve the abolitionist laws in Pennsylvania and to raise their voice on the problem of slavery at a time

when most people tried to silence the discomfort that this issue generated (Newman 7).

The mode of action of this organization consisted in mixing "petitioning and legal work" (7). Regarding petitioning, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society initiated multiple petitions in which they asked the governments to make the domestic trade shorter, to protect the free black people, and to ban overseas slave markets, in order to weaken slavery in the District of Columbia, as it can be read in Newman's work (7–8). Their objective was to make the Federal Government responsible for the issue of slavery (8).

As for legal work, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society ran "the most important legal aid system for endangered African Americans anywhere" (8). However, the abolitionist lawyers realised that, even if slavery was constitutionally supported, the law of Pennsylvania could be used to help slaves from all parts of the country, since if a slave was allowed to travel to Pennsylvania for personal reasons, he or she could remain there as a free man or woman, as this law would apply to them (8).

The principal objective of this Society was to make the Quakers' attacks on the slave system more effective and stronger. He believed that the abolitionism of the Quakers "offered a model for all Americans" (7). In 1787, Benjamin Franklin became the president of this organization and thanks to him the association gained status as an official organization in 1789 (7). This Founding Father, in short, transformed abolitionism into a serious and institutionalised movement.

It was after Franklin's death, according to Newman's paper, that the Society continued to raise awareness on the issue of slavery, by writing essays and papers and "deal[ing] with reformers in Britain, France, and Jamaica, as well as American governors, congressmen, and jurists" (7). This organization focused on the emerging Pennsylvania's abolition law, which became active in 1780. This abolition law, although nowadays it could be seen as weak, was so groundbreaking for its time that multiple slaves would try to escape in order to move to free Pennsylvania (7).

This Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery made Pennsylvania become the first State to approve a law against slavery (7–8). As Edward Raymond Turner wrote in his article *The Abolition of Slavery in Pennsylvania*, the law would suppose a gradual abolition of slavery, since it arranged that all slaves should be registered by their owners before November the first of that year, 1780. Otherwise, they should be set free, but that from that moment on no child born in Pennsylvania would be enslaved (136–137). If an enslaved woman had a child, he or she should work as a servant only until the age of twenty-eight (137). This Act also meant the end of some social discriminations that the black community suffered, such as the fact that they were judged in special courts or the inter-racial marriage (137).

The abolitionists, however, did not quite like this law because of two main problems: the abolition was only gradual and it was easily avoidable, as Turner explained in his work. Therefore, in 1788, a new Act was created in order to "enforce and explain the previous one" (138). This new Act highlighted that no husband and wife would be separated, even if they were slaves, and that every black kid should be registered (138–139). The abolitionists, however, still disagreed with



this law since it did not provide a straight abolition of slavery because its plan for doing so was still too gradual (139).

It was in 1790 that the State Constitution's Declaration of Rights stated that "all men were born equally free and independent, and that they had an inalienable right to life and liberty" (Murray 138). In 1792, a committee of the House of Representatives came to the conclusion that slavery was "not only unlawful in itself, but repugnant to the State constitution" (138). Afterwards, in 1793, the abolitionists appealed to the State Senate to obtain an absolute abolition of slavery. Nevertheless, it would not be until 1865 that slavery was completely eradicated from the United States.

#### **4. Racism in the United States.**

##### **4.1. Civil War.**

The American Civil War was the final result of multiple centuries of debates on the controversy over slavery, as Eric Foner explained in his work *The Causes of the American Civil War: Recent Interpretations and New Directions* (197). It was after Abraham Lincoln, an antislavery Republican, was elected the president of the US on November the 6th of 1861 that eleven Southern States broke away from the Union ("American Civil War Timeline").

These withdrawn Southern States were constitutionalised as the Confederate States of America on February the 4th, 1864, and they elected as their president the Mississippi senator, Jefferson Davis. The Confederate president foresaw a long war, so he started calling out for volunteers and converged them in South Carolina, in such a way that by April, Davis found himself in command of 62.000 troops ("Confederate States of America").

Finally, on April 12 of 1861, the American Civil War started. The conflict broke out after the Confederate troops entered through violence into Fort Summer, where the Union troops were shooting at them and forcing the latter to surrender, since they lacked supplies. On July 16 of 1861 the First Battle of Bull Run took place, which ended with a victory for the Confederates ("Confederate States of America").

It was in February of 1862, a year after the Secession, that the Confederate president was able to apply the Martial Law, by which all males between the age of 18 and 35 were obliged to make a military service. Nevertheless, the owners of 20 slaves or more would be released from the obligation, as they could send slaves in their place. Nevertheless, the Confederate troops were hugely outnumbered by the soldiers of the Union ("Confederate States of America").

However, the Confederation faced a social problem because of its mandatory military service, because since most capable men were in war, there were not enough people to watch over the slaves. Many slaves tried to escape and showed disobedience towards the white population, so the Confederation created special tribunals to judge them, and it concluded that this situation could be solved by sending the slaves into military service. Also, as there was a lack of white workforce, many black people (both free and enslaved) were employed during the war ("Confederate States of America").

Because of many economical and organizational negligence committed by the Confederation and its president, more and more of their soldiers were deserting, which would mean the defeat for the Confederation. Because of this, Jefferson Davis proposed to arm the soldiers and send them to war in exchange for their liberation in what would be the last reunion of the Congress in 1865. As a consequence, the General Order 14 was approved, by which black soldiers would be recruited and trained, under the promise that those who served in the military would be rewarded with their freedom ("Confederate States of America").

On April 9th, 1865, the Confederate troops capitulated to Union General Ulysses S. Grant, and regardless of Davis's orders, many other troops followed her example and raised the white flag in front of the Union. Officials of the Confederation admitted defeat in May 1865, but Davis refused to accept it. This, however, was of little use to him, since he was captured by Union forces in Georgia and sentenced to two years in prison. The American Civil War met its end on May 13 of 1865, and with it, so did slavery ("Confederate States of America").

#### **4.2. Reconstruction Era and The Civil Rights Movement.**

Slavery was abolished in 1865, giving birth to the period between 1865 and 1877, known as the Reconstruction. However, although the Reconstruction gave the African American people new rights they had never enjoyed before, such as the right to vote for the men or the right to have equal paid jobs, "many of the equalities granted in theory such as voting rights were quickly taken away again in practise" ("The Civil Rights Movement in America").

The Southern States, for example, approved some laws called "black codes" by which black people would be kept at working in farms and or as servants and with a very low salary ("The Civil Rights Movement in America"). Other laws approved by the Southern states were called "Jim Crow Laws," and they prevented the black population from enjoying the use of public spaces (Morris 17). Moreover, after the Civil War, the white supremacist<sup>1</sup> group "Klu Klux Klan" was established in the South, where they engaged in violently attacking black people (72–73). These are just some examples of the social discrimination suffered by the black community even after the official abolition of slavery.

Racial segregation<sup>2</sup> began when the Supreme Court declared that, although The Fourteenth Amendment of the US constitution proclaimed that the freed slaves were citizens equal to those who had never experienced slavery, to divide people in racial groups was not a violation of the Constitution. According to the right to vote that the black men had just acquired, and despite the fact that the Fifteenth Amendment stated that no reason such as race would prevent black people from voting, the State leaders used multiple methods to reduce the African American vote as much as possible ("The Civil Rights Movement in America").

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<sup>1</sup> "The belief that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races" ("White Supremacy").

<sup>2</sup> "The separation or isolation of a race, class, or ethnic group by enforced or voluntary residence in a restricted area, by barriers to social intercourse, by separate educational facilities, or by other discriminatory means" ("Racial Segregation").

Due to this situation, many protests took place with the objective of improving the rights of black people ("The Civil Rights Movement in America"). The Civil Rights Movement began as one of these political protests, and before Martin Luther King Jr. became the face and voice of the fight, many black men and women raised their voices against segregation ("The Civil Rights Movement in America"). According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (236), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 took place thanks to multiple public protests, one of the most important was the struggle that Oliver Brown went through to send his son to a white school. Supreme Court's decision that racial segregation in schools was anti-constitutional in 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* (236).

Finally, the peaceful protests organized by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement delivered results. The Civil Rights Act culminated racial segregation in 1964, only one year later, in 1965, the Voting Rights Act prohibited any action that would prevent men of any ethnicity to exercise their right to vote. In 1972, the Equal Opportunity Act ensured labor equality, regardless of ethnicity ("The Civil Rights Movement in America").

Furthermore, there is one minority's experience left on which to inquire: the Native Americans. As Angela Pulley Hudson and Hatty Ruth Miller state in their article "Unsettling Histories of the South," Native American communities had an important role in "shaping the South" (34). As it is pointed out by Hudson and Miller, the attention that has been paid to the black people's fight for equal rights has erased the Natives' situation from the historical studies (34). Nevertheless, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 by which the indigenous tribes were displaced from their territories, since these were inside the limits of Georgia, so they settled in the east side of the Mississippi river ("Indian Removal Act"). Because of this forced Migration, the South was able to grow and expand (Hudson and Miller 38).

It was after the Native "disappearance" from the South that the non-Indian Southerners started appropriating their culture<sup>3</sup> by adopting their names and wearing historically inaccurate costumes (39). A good example of this situation is Warner McCary, a man whose mother was a black slave and whose father was, probably, her white owner. However, he created a new identity for himself, as Okah Tubbee, the son of Mushulatubbee the leader of the Choctaw tribe (37). On the other hand, there were also some people who wanted to exalt their origins as Southerners, and a key point of the reappropriation of their culture was to denigrate any type of blackness. (40) Although the Native people remained in no man's land during the fight for civil rights, they ended up benefiting from the victories won by the side led by Martin Luther King Jr (34-38).

## **5. Black Lives Matter Movement.**

### **5.1. Contemporary discrimination.**

It was in 1945 that the scholar Ruth Benedict defined the term "racism" in her book *Race and Racism*, as "the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and

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<sup>3</sup> Cultural appropriation: "the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture" ("Cultural Appropriation").

another group is destined to congenital superiority" (87). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva collects, in his article "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation", many different definitions of racism given by many different authors, but they all agree that racism is an institutionalised issue by which a "white majority" enjoys a higher social position and, in this way, sets aside a discriminated minority designated on the basis of ethnicity (466).

"First of all, racism is a system" (9), states Camara Phyllis Jones in her article "Confronting Institutionalized Racism." She explains that white people and white communities experience an unfair benefit, called "white privilege" (9), and that black people and communities experience a little-deserved discrimination (7-20). Jones divides this "racism system" into some subgroups, such as institutionalised racism or personally mediated racism, among others. The different aspects of this system will be analyzed in the following paragraphs.

The definition given to institutional racism by the Cambridge dictionary is "policies, rules, practices, etc. that have become a usual part of the way an organization or society works, and that result in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race" ("Institutional Racism"). Jones explains in her article that institutionalised racism "manifests itself both in material conditions and in access to power" (10).

Regarding material conditions, A. Gordon Darroch and Wilfred G. Marston from the York University in Toronto and the University of Michigan respectively, explained that these "material conditions" (C. P. Jones 10) are the result of a "social differentiation of ethnic populations" (A. G. Darroch and W.G. Marston 491), for example within the white and black communities in the United States (491). As to the access to power, Camara Phyllis Jones explains that these social discrimination stops the black communities from being able to access information, necessary resources, and their voices "including voting rights, representation in government, and control of the media" (C. P. Jones 10).

Another of the divisions made by Jones is the "personally mediated racism" (10). In her article "Levels of Racism: A Theoretic Framework and a Gardener's Tale," she defines it as the "prejudice and discrimination, where prejudice means differential assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intentions of others according to their race, and discrimination means differential actions toward others according to their race" (1212-1213). In short, it is the unconscious assumption that racialised people have certain characteristics and conduct just because of their ethnicity, and it is "condoned by societal norms" (1213).

The last classification of racism made by Jones in her article is "internalised racism" (11). Suzanne Lipsky defined it as:

The personal conscious or subconscious acceptance of the dominant society's racist views, stereotypes and biases of one's ethnic group. It gives rise to patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that result in discriminating, minimizing, criticizing, finding fault, invalidating, and hating oneself while simultaneously valuing the dominant culture. (S. Lipsy)

According to Jones (11), this internalised racism affects racialised<sup>4</sup> people, since after having lived all their lives in a racist system that discriminates against them and considers them inferior, they themselves end up considering it. This complex created by the racist system, as Jones writes in her article, is responsible as well for ethnic segregation, since because of it many black people suffer from self-weakening, relinquishment, and hopelessness, which lead them to carry out conducts such as dropping school or denying their own culture (11).

## **5.2. BLM Origins: Trayvon Martin.**

On 26th of February, 2012, the white American man George Zimmerman shot Trayvon Martin to death, a 17-year-old boy who was unarmed, only holding a can of iced tea and a bag of candies. Zimmerman was interrogated by the police, and he admitted that he had killed Trayvon but that it had been in self-defense, since he seemed to be "up to no good, on drugs or something", so he was set free with no charges (Siddique).

This, however, was seen as a complete injustice by the black community, including Barack Obama, who was the president of the United States when the events took place. Because of these protests, Zimmerman was arrested 44 days after the event (Siddique). The trial took place on July the 13th of 2013, and the jury found Zimmerman innocent, since they concluded that the man had acted in self-defense in the face of imminent danger of death. Many of Zimmerman's neighbours testified that they heard screams for help, he said that the screams were his since he had been attacked by Trayvon, while the parents and relatives of the murdered man testified that this was not possible and that the screams were from the young Martin (Siddique).

As it was written by Nicole Chavez in an article for the CNN, the murder of Trayvon Martin was "the case that launched the Black Lives Matter movement and reminded the country that we weren't living in a post-racial society" (Chavez). The opinions of the Americans and the rest of the world were divided regarding Zimmerman's response to attacking Trayvon. Those who supported the murderer claimed that he legally exercised the second amendment by using his weapon, while those who took the side of the killed argue that Zimmerman knowingly acted incorrectly as he disobeyed the 911 recommendation of not following the young man (Chavez).

Consequently, to Zimmerman's release without charges, the demonstrations started. When Trayvon was murdered, he was wearing a black hoodie, and this became a symbol for the protesters. The American streets were filled with men and women of all ethnicities wearing a black hood and shouting "I am Trayvon Martin!", with the intention of showing their solidarity to the boy's relatives and their disagreement towards the jury's decision regarding his killer (Chavez).

These were the events that made Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi create the Black Lives Matter network. The Black Lives Matter institution is a movement with the objective of ending systematic violence against the black community, eradicating white supremacy, and creating a safe space for the black people to express themselves ("Six Years Strong").

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<sup>4</sup> "To give a racial character: to categorize, marginalize, or regard according to race" ("Racialize").

### **5.3. BLM Nowadays.**

Although it was the murder of Michael Brown (a black teenager) only a year after the murder of Trayvon Martin that drove the BLM to the public sphere, it would not be until 2020 with the killing of George Floyd that the movement reached a global scale (Maqbool). On May 25 of 2020, the Minneapolis police arrested this 42-year-old-black man, George Floyd, when he was leaving a groceries store (Hill).

Many theories have been speculated around this event, because of Floyd's criminal past. However, many security camera videos recorded from different locations, and official documents of the police revealed that the agents that took George Floyd's life acted neglectfully, and they were discharged (Hill). Derek Chauvin, the officer who suffocated Floyd by resting his knee on the neck of the latter for around eight minutes ending with his life, was charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. Moreover, on June the third of 2020, a more serious second-degree murder was charged against Chauvin and the other three officers, Thomas Lane, J. Alexander Kueng and Tou Thao were charged "with aiding and abetting second-degree murder" (Hill).

The eight minutes and forty-six seconds that took the officers to kill George Floyd became a symbol for the BLM movement, and a motto and a cry for the end of police brutality (Hill). The New York Times editors Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui and Jugal K. Patel collected in their article "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History" the evolution of the protests after the death of George Floyd.

It was on the sixth of June of 2020 when the massive BLM protests started, when "about 15 million to 26 million people in the United States have participated in demonstrations over the death of George Floyd and others in recent weeks" (Buchanan et al.). The demonstrations themselves started the 26th of May, but since then the protesters have multiplied by hundreds, reaching their higher number of followers during June despite the Coronavirus pandemic and its social distancing; for the protesters, the fight for decent and equal human rights became more important than their own physical health (Buchanan et al.).

### **6. Conclusion.**

To conclude, the historical evolution of racist mentality has been analysed. Slavery has existed in most part of human societies, and it was in the 15th century, with the Portuguese explorations in Africa, when it acquired a racial status. Due to the colonisation of the American continent and the emergence of the plantation business, both the Native Americans and the African people were enslaved. The black slaves started escaping and buying their freedom, so that they would write their stories in what are nowadays known as "slave narratives".

The Spanish Queen Isabel and King Fernando "The Catholics" promoted laws to protect the indigenous peoples of America. Their son, Charles the First of Spain, promulgated the Encomienda system, by which the colonists would possess some Natives in order to educate and

evangelize them, in exchange of their physical work. Some people, like fray Bartolomé de las Casas, took a position against this system, and through debates and written works they fought for the freedom of the indigenous people.

The official abolitionist movement started among the Quakers, who despite how in the first moment many of them owned slaves, they managed to get out of their error and began to fight for their freedom. They founded societies with that purpose, and along the years they achieved some laws that protected the black slaves and that eventually would set them free.

The American Civil War and the victory of the North was what definitely prohibited slavery in America, although the black population faced now the problem of segregation and social discrimination. This, however, was solved through the peaceful protests of the Civil Rights movement, among which Martin Luther King and his "I have a dream" stand out.

Finally, in 2012, Trayvon Martin was killed and his murderer was found innocent, although he had confessed the crime. This event started a wave of anger and nonconformity on the black community, which led to the origin of the Black Lives Matter movement, with the purpose of ending violence against black people and raising awareness on non-black citizens about this problem. In 2020, George Floyd was murdered by four police officers, and this case was what launched the movement on a global scale, in such a way that protests in favor of the rights of African American people began to take place all around the world.

Many people think, however, that racism is a problem that belongs to the past, and that it ended with the end of the age of segregation. As it has been analysed in this essay, based on multiple references and evidence of different kinds, racism is still alive today. It is a scourge that has been part of the construction of the world as it is, therefore, it is impregnated in many aspects of our society. Even nowadays, in 2021, the BLM movement remains a somewhat controversial issue but of immense relevance. Because of this, it is important that all of us make an effort to educate ourselves about racism and form a personal and critical opinion, which was the aim of this essay.

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