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# Trabajo Fin de Grado

RACISM IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: THE CASES OF MICHAEL BROWN AND  
TRAYVON MARTIN AND THE APPEARANCE OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER  
MOVEMENT

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## Resumen

El racismo en Estados Unidos ha sido una constante innegable a lo largo de la historia pero ha sido en estos últimos años cuando, gracias a la influencia de las redes sociales, más casos de violencia racista han salido a la luz. Se trata de casos como los de Michael Brown y Trayvon Martin, que fueron, además, los que propiciaron la creación del movimiento Black Lives Matter que ahora lucha por los derechos de la comunidad afroamericana. En este trabajo de fin de grado propongo un análisis de la situación de esta comunidad así como de las manifestaciones racistas que ocurren en el siglo XXI y el efecto que ha tenido el movimiento Black Lives Matter en la sociedad americana.

**Palabras clave:** Racismo, delitos raciales, Black Lives Matter, supremacía blanca

## Abstract

Racism in the United States has been an undeniable constant throughout history but it has been in these last years when thanks to social media more violent racist attacks have surfaced. Cases such as Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin's were the ones that have propitiated the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is currently fighting for the African-American rights. In this essay, I propose an analysis of the situation of this community as well as of the racist manifestations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the effect that the Black Lives Matter movement has had on United States' society.

**Keywords:** Racism, hate-crime, Black Lives Matter, white supremacy

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## INTRODUCTION

Trayvon Martin, killed by a night watch coordinator in 2012. Michael Brown, killed by a police officer in 2014. Philando Castile, killed by a police officer in 2016. Alton Sterling, also killed by a police officer in 2016. These are just some examples of the many lives that have been lost due to racism in the last few years. Racism is a social issue that has always been present in the United States. As George Lipsitz affirms, “There has always been racism in the United States, but it has not always been the same racism” (371). From the moment that the first slaves arrived in the colonies, until the present day, with a black President in the White House, there has been racism and this will not change as long as the views held by white supremacists are the main belief among not only citizens but also their institutions. The point to be taken into account is that present racism is not the same as the one that the first slaves suffered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or that was endured by the African-American community during the Civil Rights era. In fact, as Angela Davis notes in “Race and Criminalization,” “while explicit, old-style racism may be increasingly socially unacceptable, this does not mean that U.S. society has been purged of racism” (270).

As it has been said before, racism has changed overtime and with it, its manifestations in society. There are different racial manifestations in present-day United States, but, for the sake of my analysis, I divided them into two categories: non-violent and violent. The non-violent manifestations are the ones that would not inflict a direct damage on the person but rather on the whole community; for example, measures that would not allow people of colour to have the same salary as white people, or the same healthcare system, or similar housing conditions. These are some privileges that the white community has just for belonging to the dominant race

whereas African-Americans have to fight for them. The other manifestations would be those that imply direct damage on the people of colour. These manifestations are commonly referred to as racist attacks and are the ones that have not changed over the years.

There have been periods in which racist attacks have been more prominent and visible, whereas in other periods they have been less visible. Nowadays, I would say that we are in a period in which these attacks are getting increasing attention again. As we can see in the news, there are many cases of violence against the African-American community. Recent cases like the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, who died at the hands of the police, provoked an outburst of indignation among US society, “thousands are reacting to these shootings in social media, with everything from grief to rage to fear” (Donnella). This sentiment comes from the fact that both murders were recorded by witnesses and in both cases the police acted wrongly, killing innocent people. But older cases like the Charleston Church Massacre or the murders of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin have also been controversial and of great importance for the changing attitudes towards racism in the US. It is due to these recent (and not so recent) racist attacks that the community is reacting again against the structural racism of US society. During the decades of the 1950s and the 1960s, the African-American mobilized to change their lives. They just wanted to have the same rights as white people had, and as was stated in the US Constitution. Eventually, they made some gains that were symbolically recognized by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Yet, although, on the paper, they were granted the same rights as the white community, racism and inequality adopted other forms and continued more or less uncontrolled. It has been after the murders of these two boys and after years of

repression and racist attacks that the movement Black Lives Matter has been formed and as it will later be explained, it has played a key role when defending the rights of diverse communities of African-Americans.

In this essay I will examine the cases of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin and the appearance of the Black Lives Matter movement. The analysis of these cases, together with other events information provides us with a better understanding of US society, of the racial tensions, and the challenges that African-Americans face in the present.

In order to have a better understanding of these contemporary racist manifestations and of the cases of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin I will start by making a brief introduction to the plight of the African-American community since the period of the Civil Rights Movement. I will also look at some statistics that give us some insight into the living conditions of this community and the hate crime they face. In addition, I will examine the Barack Obama presidency and the measures that he has taken in order to improve the living conditions of African Americans. Regarding the theoretical framework adopted for this essay, I will delve into both the issue of white supremacy and critical perspectives on race as developed by race studies in order to get a wider view of the contemporary racism in the United States. Finally, I will discuss the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and what it has meant for this community.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Before the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans, despite being entitled to the same rights as whites by virtue of the US Constitution, suffered from unrestrained

segregation and inequality, especially in the South. As Eric Foner (2012) illustrates, this situation started to change in 1954 when the Supreme Court annulled the doctrine of “separate but equal” and put an end to segregation in public spaces. This was just the beginning, or rather another step in a long fight for equality. During the next decade, civil rights activists fought to keep progressing and changing society and improve the lives of millions of African-Americans. They used nonviolent protests and civil disobedience as their weapons to fight against racism. Among these civil right activists, we find Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, John Lewis, and others. It was thanks to the efforts of these people that legislation like the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 was passed.

This period of civil rights reforms had several stages that were marked by different, small isolated protests that ultimately ended with better coordinated movements, leaders, and organisations. Among these protests and organisations were the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which would be the organisation behind most of the protests led by Martin Luther King, Jr. One of the biggest successes of this organisation took place in Birmingham, Alabama. After numerous confrontations between protesters and the Southern authorities, President John F. Kennedy decided to push for a new civil rights legislation. In 1963, not long after the Birmingham protests, one of the most important events, the March on Washington, took place. This march was not organised by Martin Luther King, Jr. but he, who gave his famous speech “I Have a Dream,” played a key role. King said: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal’” (in Scott King 95). More than 200.000 people participated in this march to demand

equal civil and economic rights for the African-American community. Another crucial march of the many important marches that occurred around this time was the march from Selma to Montgomery in March, 1965. What African Americans demanded was the end of the hostilities, intimidation, and local legislation that impeded their constitutional right to vote. After these marches, the Congress passed the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which increased the number of Southern blacks able to register to vote.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were the most active and best known organisations fighting for equality for African Americans, but many other organisations with other related objectives appeared. This is the case of the Black Panther Party, founded by Malcolm X. They did not think that the Civil Rights Movement was doing enough for the community because they did not address some of the problems faced by millions of poor blacks, thus bringing a class perspective to the struggle for equality. This party had a ten-point program in which they explained their requests. Among these were decent housing and the end of police brutality, which at the time took the lives of many blacks. Factors such as government repression, the deaths of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the negative view that arose among the general populace as a consequence of riots within the black community led to a decline in protest activity after the 60s. Despite all the gains achieved in this period, racial discrimination and repression continued.

The 1970s were a decade focused on accomplishing the goals of the reforms achieved in the 60s. The white community was divided between those that helped

with these changes and those who looked for retaliation. The 1980s were even more difficult for the African-American community. The ascendancy of the Republican Party and the Presidency of Ronald Reagan translated into a backlash and the disregard of the demands of this community. There was an increase in violence towards blacks, which led to the impression that the nation was coming apart as a consequence of the black movements. Although the arrival of President George Bush signalled some change and gave the African-American new hope, the real change did not come until the 1990s when President Bill Clinton took upon himself to reverse the situation of all minority groups that had been mistreated by US society and by the US government throughout history.

### **THE BLACK COMMUNITY**

In order to explain the present situation of African Americans, it is necessary to take a look at some statistics regarding their living conditions. The 2016 “State of Black America” report is an annual study issued by the National Urban League that examines the quality of black life in the United States in comparison with that of whites. This study covers areas like economics, health, education, social justice, and civic engagement. An important fact about this report is that it is not a public opinion poll, it is made with actual data. This study offers a deeper insight into challenges that the black community faces, and establishes the need for stronger policies that confront racial inequality across the country. The report reveals that blacks are just 72.2% equal to white America. This means that African Americans only get a 72.2% from the total of something from which whites get 100%. Although there have been improvements, other categories show similar results. For example, the area that shows the biggest

improvement is education, which goes from 76.1% in 2015 to 77.4% in 2016. The reason for this increase is the improvement in college attainment and enrolment. The smallest increase occurred in economics, going from 55.5% in 2015 to 56.2% in 2016, and in social justice, going from 60.6% in 2015 to 60.8% in 2016.

The number of inmates incarcerated in United States prisons is revealing of the overall tendency. Although there has been a decline in the imprisonment of African Americans since 2000 (a 47% decrease in the case of black women and a 22% decrease in the case of men), the majority of prisoners are, by large, African Americans. According to the NAACP, African Americans constitute 1 million out of the 2.3 million prison inmates, and blacks are incarcerated at six times the rate of whites. Why does this happen if the black population is approximately six times smaller than the white population? Statistically there should be more white people incarcerated, if only because the white community is larger than black people (blacks account for 12% of the population), but still, the African-American community constitutes 1 million out of the 2.3 million of incarcerated people. *The Huffington Post* put forward some of the reasons: one of the main reasons is police discrimination. The police targets more black people than white people, which leads to the belief that a lot of the US police is racist. But there are other reasons, such as the fact that in schools African-American kids are more likely to be referred to the police than other kids or that there is a 70% chance that an African American without a high school degree will be arrested by the time he reaches his thirties (Quigley).

## **OBAMA AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY**

From the very beginning blacks have been treated as an inferior race due first to the association with savagery and later to the colour of their skin. This belief is still pervasive in the United States, although it manifests itself in different ways than it did in the past. As a consequence, the treatment of blacks is not equal to that of the whites. Since assuming office in 2009, President Barack Obama has attempted to enact laws and create programs that reverse this situation and ensure that African Americans have access to rights and opportunities that so far have been denied them.

Obama is the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States and the first African-American to hold office. Among his achievements we find the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, also known as “Obamacare”, which was aimed at guaranteeing everybody access to health care; he also ended military involvement in the Iraq War and ordered the military operation that resulted in the death of Osama Bin Laden. My Brother’s Keeper, one of the programs created by Obama to improve this community, was established two years ago and its purpose was to provide opportunities for men and young boys of colour and ensure that they can reach their full potential. He also has fought against racial discrimination in schools, housing, and the workplace. Programs like these explain why the biggest improvement in the black community has occurred in the field of education. But Obama has not only focused on education but also on employment. In 2011 he enacted the American Jobs Act, a commitment to strengthen the recovery of the country and help increase access to jobs for all citizens. He wanted to do this by lowering taxes for small businesses as well as investing in projects that would provide jobs for African Americans while, at the same time, modernizing the country. Other related measures that he took are the Recovery Act (2009), which

created jobs and in this sense was essential for the African-American community because they suffer the highest unemployment rate.

These are just some of the measures that Barack Obama has adopted in order to improve the situation of African Americans in the United States. However, there are businessmen like Donald Trump, ideologues like Samuel P. Huntington, journalists like Crystal Wright, or regular citizens that maintain that Obama has not done enough for the black community and, that in fact, he has worsened their situation. These people, apart from speaking from very conservative positions, fail to consider that Obama took office during the worst period of recession since the 1930s. He had to face an unprecedented global economic crisis that affected all US citizens and, particularly, the racial minorities and the working class, and the opposition of Congress dominated by the Republican Party. Therefore, although some policies might not have been as effective as expected from a black president, the truth is that he has achieved significant improvements not only for the black community but for the country as a whole.

### **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY**

There are different critical perspectives on racism but for the purpose of this essay I will only focus on two of them, the institutionalist perspective and the internal colonialism perspective. The former emerged in the 1960s and argues that racism is societal and implicates all white people. It is from this perspective that the term institutional racism comes, and that attempts to explain racism as the result of the normal operations of US institutions (Bonilla-Silva 26). This perspective maintains that all whites receive advantages from the present racial order. Peggy McIntosh, in an

article entitled “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” explains how white people have a series of privileges just because they are the dominant race. She calls these white privileges an “invisible knapsack of special provisions”, a package of unearned assets that white people can count on every day and remain oblivious about them (165). She explains how she was taught not to see herself as an oppressor but as an individual that can work for the benefit of others which will allow them to be more like us. This is the view that has prevailed in the United States: white people think that by imposing their way of living or their way of thinking are actually helping other groups. Also in this line, Kwaine Ture and Charles Hamilton argue that racism is an outgrowth of colonial domination and suggest that its contemporary expression has been institutionalized (in Bonilla-Silva 27).

The other perspective also touches upon issues of colonialism to explain the causes of present-day racism. In fact, it postulates that racism is structured by the colonial status of social minorities in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 28). One of the main advocates of this perspective is Robert Blauner, and for him racism is based on a system in which the white majority “raises its social position by exploiting, controlling and keeping down others who are categorized in racial or ethnic terms” (in Bonilla-Silva 28). During the high period of colonialism, people from other places were brought to America, which entailed the need for a rigid racial order that guaranteed the maintenance of the privileges of the white population. Blauner states that the whites have all the privileges but he gives particular importance to the advantages of white people in the labour market (in Bonilla-Silva 29). If we take a look at statistics regarding the rate of unemployment for whites and blacks, a great difference can be observed. According to the Centre for Economic Policy and Research “the overall unemployment

rate for blacks has been twice the unemployment rate for whites” (in Cashman). From the perspective of internal colonialism, education alone is not the cure for racism, because it sees racism as a system of exploitation and assumes that large-scale social mobilization is necessary for the abolition of racism.

These two perspectives show different ways of looking at the problem of racism. One centres on the decisions and policies that continue to oppress a racial group, whereas the other is more focused on the overall social structure. But both of them agree on the need to make visible how white privileges are embedded in contemporary society and how they play a central role in controlling and exploiting a racial minority like African Americans and on the need to make it visible and fight it. For white people these privileges are something innate that comes with their whiteness and they do not see them as privileges. As David Gillborn affirms, “the racialized nature of politics, policing, education and every other sphere of public life is so deeply ingrained that it has become normalized – unremarked, and taken for granted” (319). It is often taken for granted that racial minorities, in order to attain equality, should follow the beliefs and attitudes of the dominant cultural and political force, that is, those of the white community. In this way, imperceptible privileges turn into the fuel of white supremacy for a post-Civil Rights era and, ultimately, of the various forms of violence exerted on racial minorities.

### **VIOLENT RACIST MANIFESTATIONS IN THE CURRENT TIME**

As was noted above, there are different manifestations of racism in contemporary society. Some are more violent than others, like hate crimes or racist attacks. It is to these that I turn now. First, I will look at some statistics from different periods to

examine the progression of this type of crimes and then I will focus on two recent cases, the murders of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin.

According to the FBI's Hate Crime Report from 2000, a hate crime or a biased crime can be defined as "those offences motivated in part or singularly by personal prejudice against others because of a diversity – race, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity/national origin, or disability". I will focus on the reports from the years 2000, 2008, and 2014. In these reports I will centre on the areas Incidents and Offences, Victims, and Offenders. In 2000, according to the data provided by the FBI, there were 8,063 biased-motivated criminal incidents, 7,783 in 2008 and 5,479 in 2014. As can be seen, hate crime has progressively decreased with the passing of time. In 2000, 53.8% hate crimes were motivated by racial bias; in 2008, 51.3%; and in 2014, 47.0%. The victims of these racial bias crimes accounted for 54.5% of the total victims in 2000; 51% in 2008; and 47% in 2014. Therefore, violence towards the black community has decreased by 7.5% in 14 years, which is still a very low figure for such a long period of time. Of these racial bias crimes, those that are anti-black represented, in 2000, 65.5% of the total; 72.9% in 2008; and 63.5% in 2014. As regards the offenders, there is also a change with the passing of the years. In 2000, 64.4% of the hate crime offenders were white, while 18.7% were black; in 2008, 61.1% of the offenders belonged to the white community and 20.2% belonged to the black community; and finally, in 2014, 52% of offenders were white and 23.2% were black. What it is interesting about these figures is that people believe that the black community is violent and commits many crimes, but these figures show that, although the percentage of black offenders has increased over the years, there have always been more white offenders than black. Still, we still

believe that the African-American community has a higher criminality rate than the white community.

In conclusion, from the data extracted from these reports, it can be seen how hate crimes towards African Americans has been decreasing, especially during Obama's presidency. Although it is also significant that, precisely in 2008, the last year of George W. Bush presidency, anti-black racial bias crimes had a significant increase. Overall, although there has been some improvement, there is still a lot of work to do to halt racism and racist attacks like those that took the lives of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin.

#### **MICHAEL BROWN AND TRAYVON MARTIN**

Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin are perfect examples of the kind of violent racist manifestation that has hit the headlines in the last few years. In the case of Martin, it was a person acting as a policeman that killed him. In the case of Brown it was an actual policeman. The first case that I am going to comment on is that of Trayvon Martin. Trayvon Martin was a 17-year-old boy who was shot to death by George Zimmerman, a neighbourhood watch coordinator. There are different sides of the story, the version told by Zimmerman to the police and the one based on witnesses and different facts. They do not coincide. What follows contains a mixture of both versions. The incident started when George Zimmerman saw Trayvon Martin, who was coming back home after watching a football game at a friend's house. Zimmerman thought that Martin was acting suspicious so he decided to call 911. Zimmerman's reasons for calling 911 were that Martin was wearing a black hoodie, that he had his hand in his waistband, and that, although it was raining, he was just walking around.

Zimmerman's words, as they appear in the transcript of his call to the police published by *The Washington Post*, are as follows: "This guy looks like he's up to no good or he's on drugs or something [...] He's got his hand in his waistband and he's a black male [...] Something is wrong with him [...] I don't know what his deal is [...] These assholes, they always get away." As it could be proved later on in the investigation, Martin was not carrying any gun or any dangerous weapon. The only things he was carrying were Skittles and a bottle of Arizona Iced Tea. The transcription of Zimmerman's call reveal the stereotypes that people tend to associate with the black community. The fact that he was wearing a hoodie was one of the reasons why Zimmerman thought that he was "up to no good." The hoodie has become one of the most widespread stereotypes for the African-American community, but there are others that reveal the persistence of racism such as the fact that black people like fried chicken, the belief that black women are always irritated and prone to anger, or that black people are more athletic than white people. Innocent as these more contemporary stereotypes might seem, they contribute to the structural racism of US society. But more important still is the fact that black people are perceived as aggressive and brutish by white people (Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman 1997). This belief that black people are more aggressive could explain Zimmerman's response, although in no way can it be considered an excuse for the killing of a young boy. Following his call to 911, Zimmerman proceeded to follow Martin, although the police told him not to do so. After that, the phone call ended but, according to other calls to 911 by witnesses, Zimmerman and Martin started fighting on the ground, one of them asked for help, there was a shot, and Trayvon Martin fell dead.

This is the version that emerges from the transcription of Zimmerman's phone call as well as the calls other witnesses to 911. Zimmerman's version of the conflict is a slightly different. According to Zimmerman's testimony, when he got off the car to see the address where the police could come, Martin appeared out of nowhere and asked him if he had a problem. Zimmerman said "No" and then Martin responded "You do now" (in Alvarez and Williams). Then, Martin attacked Zimmerman. Zimmerman stated that, while they were fighting, Martin banged his head into the pavement several times, put his hand on his nose and mouth, and told him that he was going to die that night. He felt that Martin was going to grab his gun and, before he could do it, Zimmerman shot him. The problem with Zimmerman's version is that his injuries do not match his description. He had some injuries in the back of his head and a broken nose but if Martin had hit him as Zimmerman told the police, he should have more injuries, at least in the head. This fact made the detective of the case suspect that he was not telling all the truth. In fact, there are still some parts of the story that do not make sense.

Apart from the fact that it was a terrible crime, it did not help the matter that the police did not act as they should have. The Sanford Police Department was widely criticised for failing to investigate the case, especially the first night. They should have tested Zimmerman for drugs and alcohol but they did not. Moreover, he was not charged because they thought that there were no grounds to disprove his story of the events. This is not the first case in which the behaviour of the US Police has been controversial regarding the treatment of the African-American community. Although in this case it was a matter of not following the right proceedings in the investigation, there are other instances in which the US police has not treated African Americans

correctly or in the same way as they treat the white community. But not only does the police mistreat the black community, the legal system does too. In 2012 (the same year Trayvon Martin was killed) Marissa Alexander, a woman who fired a gun into the air to defend herself from her abusive husband, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. What is relevant about this case is that it was taken by Angela Corey, the same state attorney that took Martin's case. While in the case of Zimmerman judge and jury accepted the stand your ground self-defence, this did not occur in the case of Marissa Alexander. The stand-your-ground law states that people can defend themselves if they perceive a visible threat. These two cases show the discrimination that African Americans face by the legal system and by society.

After analysing the different versions of the murder of Trayvor Martin, and seeing that Zimmerman seems guilty for his murder, it is clear that there is a problem not only in the mentality of the people but also in the US legal system. The fact that a man that murders a boy is released and a woman, who only tries to defend herself, is charged guilty points to the different criteria for judging and prosecuting whites and blacks.

The other case of a violent racist manifestation that has achieved notoriety is the murder of Michael Brown. All the information regarding this case comes from *The Washington Post* and from a transcript of the case *State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson*. Michael Brown was an 18 year-old boy killed by Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson. On August 9, 2014, police officer Darren Wilson got a call about a possible theft in a nearby market. In that call two people are described as the possible thieves. One of them was Michael Brown. As Wilson saw two people that matched the characteristics

of the thieves he asked them to move to the sidewalk but Brown and his friend refused because they were near their destination. After their conversation, Wilson radioed for support and backed his vehicle at an angle that blocked Brown's path as well as the traffic. When Wilson tried to open the door of his car, Brown slammed the door shut. Then they proceeded to have a fight through the window of the car. During the fight, Brown hit Wilson in the face and two shots were fired. Brown was injured in his hand. After the car shooting Brown and his friend started running and Wilson proceeded to chase them after asking for more backup. It is at this point that the testimonies do not match. While Wilson said that he did not shoot Brown, Brown's friend said that Wilson did fire his gun but he did not know if it hit Brown. But not only did Brown's friend said this, another witness testified that Wilson shot Brown in the leg. Other witnesses say that Wilson did not fire his gun until Brown had stopped running and turned around to face the police officer. After this, Wilson said that Brown gave the first steps towards him with one of his hands going under his waist band. There are different accounts on this particular moment. Some people say that Brown was running towards Wilson (testimony which coincides with Wilson's); others say that he was walking towards Wilson and then the police officer shot him; still others say that Brown was walking towards Wilson and stopped, did a movement (it is not specified whether it was violent or threatening) and then Wilson shot him. Apparently when Brown stopped moving Wilson stopped shooting but he resumed the shooting once Brown started moving again. Yet, there are different versions about this part of the story. The most common version is that Wilson continued shooting Brown even when he was lying on the ground.

Michael Brown's case could be considered as an example of police brutality due to the way in which the police officer acted. In theory, the police should protect every citizen of the USA but, instead, there is a percentage of police officers that rather than serve and protect, as Jewelle Taylor Gibbs states in *Race and Justice*, "harass and intimidate" (258). This situation is what Black Lives Matter has been trying to denounce from the moment they were first organized. Although Gibbs wrote her book twenty years ago, the situation has not really changed much. In relation with the duty to "protect and serve," Gibbs illustrates how the police protects and serves the dominant society in order to maintain the current *status quo*. In Gibbs words, what they do is "to protect the institutions that control the society and to serve the leaders that control the institutions" (269). The police officers both reveal and maintain the prevailing attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values of society. She explains how the duty of the police officers is to minimise the intrusion of not only African Americans but any other unworthy group of people into the mainstream because this could put in jeopardy the identity, the security, and the privileges of the white community (269). After considering all the testimonies of the case it is hard to reach a conclusion about what really happened, but the result is the same, a police officer killed a black kid unnecessarily.

Both Martin and Brown's cases have a common denominator, their killers were found not guilty, thus showing that not only is there a problem with police brutality in the United States, but also with the US legal system and its members, who condemn the innocent and release the perpetrators. These two boys have unwillingly become clear examples of contemporary hate crimes.

## **RACISM AND IGNORANCE**

These two cases have been very controversial in US society. They both prove that although there might have been a change in the mentality of the people towards racism, it is still very present and active. But why is racism still so pervasive? In an article for *The Huffington Post*, Katherine Fleshman notes that “racism is a learned behaviour that can be unlearned, but in order for us to unlearn it, we have to acknowledge it first.” Children learn from their parents and from the society they live in, so if we educate children from the very beginning by telling them that we are all equals and that there are no differences between black or white people, then a change will start. Beverly Daniel Tatum deals with this issue in *“Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Conversations about Race*. In her book, Tatum explains how she always comes across people that ask her if racism still exists and whether racism is a thing of the past. Racism, notes Tatum, is not a thing of the past. According to her, the impact of racism starts very early in our lives, “when we are exposed to misinformation about people different from ourselves” (123). This is due to the fact that the information does not come first hand but from other people that has distorted it and shaped it according to hereditary cultural stereotypes. That is, we create images in our heads regarding how people from another community are that are based on what other people have told us. But not only that, we create these images because we have not been told about those communities. If society does not provide its children with a truthful image and veritable information about others, if information and history is distorted, then the new generations will not have a correct image of the other communities.

This situation perpetuates the ideas that white people have regarding African Americans. This problem is very well illustrated in Tatum's article. A young woman preparing to be a high school English teacher expressed that she had never learned anything about black authors in any of her English courses and she was wondering how she could be able to teach something that she has not studied. Another student responded to her question by saying "It's not my fault that Blacks don't write books." That is, people are not taught any black literature or exposed to any black authors and, as a consequence, they believe that black people do not write books (which is not true) and, therefore, that they are a less gifted race, which in turn propagates notions of progress and savagery deeply entrenched in the colonial history of the USA. The boy in the example simply propagates the idea that he has constructed based on what he has been told or, in this case, what he has not been told. Freshman explains in her article how she felt the first time she was in a black neighbourhood and how she could not imagine that that place existed in her country (2016). These two views prove that there is a clear separation between these two communities and that a change is needed in order for them to become one. However, for that great change to occur, society as a whole, with all its communities and institutions should be involved. As McIntosh observes, "Individual acts can palliate, but cannot end, these problems" (169). People rebelling against the present situation is the first step to change it but not the only one. Social mobilization, which the thinkers of the internal colonial perspective considered the cure for racism, is what is happening right now thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement.

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER**

The murders of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin were the turning point for a series of injustices that the black community had been suffering for years. It was after Trayvon Martin's murderer, was acquitted for his crime that the Black Lives Matter movement was created. In the words of one of its founders (in Garza):

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.

Although this movement was created after Zimmerman's acquittal, it became visibly notorious after Mike Brown's death. This movement became rapidly notorious due to the fact that it started and spread in the cyberspace, using social media to mobilize people and develop its political agenda. Some of their objectives are: to end the war on black people, reparations for past and continuous harms, divestment from the institutions that criminalize and harm black people, and investment in the education, health, and safety of black people among others.

Using Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, they created a movement unlike most freedom black campaigns that preceded them. This movement has been influenced by other different movements. Among them, we find the 1960s Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the 1980s black feminist movement, the 1980s anti-apartheid movement, and the 2000s LGBT movement. What it is interesting about this movement is that includes the whole community; that is, women, the working poor, the disabled, and those who identify as queer and transgender. All these marginalized

people have played an important role in the formation of Black Lives Matter and in their ongoing protests.

It was after Mike Brown's death that the movement organized its Freedom Ride to Ferguson, Missouri. When they arrived to Ferguson they organized pacific demonstrations demanding justice for Michael Brown. Demonstrators did not only complain because of the murder of this young boy but also because his body was left in the street for hours until he was taken to the morgue. This situation was documented by bystanders, and it was its rapid spreading through the Internet what incited months of both peaceful and violent protests in Ferguson with people from all over the country. The protesters chanted "Hands Up, Don't Shoot," denouncing all these years of excessive and avoidable police brutality.

Despite being just one of the hundreds of organizations that went to Ferguson, Black Lives Matter emerged as one of the best organized and visible. Its motto not only became the name of the movement but a call for action against the killings of African Americans. It is due to the new media that they use to organize themselves that this movement has become a model for black liberation movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Black Lives Matter has organized more than 950 demonstrations around the world targeting well-known, police-involved deaths and seeking social justice. Partly because of the public outcry promoted by Black Lives Matter, the US Department of Justice has investigated police misconduct in several cities and in 2014 enacted the Death in Custody Reporting Act, according to which the US authorities have to report to the Department of Justice any deaths of prisoners occurring while in custody. One of the reasons why this act was enacted is that, thanks to the rapid dissemination of videos of police brutality towards blacks and other minorities, people started to question the

legality of police procedures. Black Lives Matter played a major role in alerting people about these incidents thanks to the platform that they have created in the Internet. As a consequence, millions of people are aware of the impact of police brutality. In a word, one of the main reasons why Black Lives Matter is so important is because it has made racism visible in a society that has been trying to hide it.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, the examination and analysis of different racist attacks, such as the murders of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, together with information about the differences between the black community and the white community, have shown the great inequalities that persist in US society. From the moment that the first black slaves arrived in America, they were subjugated by the white elites. Slavery is over but racism is not. In present-day United States, different forms of racism have developed to maintain a social structure that puts the white community on top and the racial minorities in a subordinate position. White privilege, for example, is one of those subtle forms of racism that help maintain white supremacy. These manifestations of racism are found deep down in the US social, political, legal, economic, and cultural structure. This is the reason why racism manages to perpetuate itself and why it is so difficult to eliminate. But this should be no impediment to mobilize in order to change things, just like the black community has done in the past.

A great moment of hope for African Americans occurred when Barack Obama was elected President of the United States and become the first African American to enter the White House. Like any other President, his measures have been liked by some and disliked by others. One of the many criticisms that he has received is that he

has not done enough for the black community. Although this is debatable, there is no doubt that he has tried to improve the living conditions of African Americans in the United State. All the statistics mentioned above show that, although small, there have been visible improvements, including a decline in the number of hate-crime victims.

Hate crimes, as I noted above, are violent racist manifestations, and cases like the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling among many others testify to the complex situation that country is facing at the moment. It is due to these racist attacks that people have finally started to react and mobilize. They have done so by creating movements like Black Lives Matter and organizing protests in the places where the attacks were committed. The popularity of this movement is due to its presence in social media. They have managed to make racist attacks visible around the globe, and one was even broadcasted live for the world to see. But this movement is not only important because they are making racism visible in the United States, but because they are dealing with the new manifestations of racism and are bringing about a change for the black community.

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