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The Emergence of Black Lives Matter under the Presidency of Barack Obama

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Département d'Études Anglophones

The Emergence of Black Lives Matter under the Presidency of Barack Obama

Master 1 LLCER Research Dissertation
presented by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BLM: Black Lives Matter

GOP: Grand Old Party

MLK: Martin Luther King Jr.

M4BL: Movement for Black Lives

NAN: National Action Network

NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

LGBTQ: Lesbians Gays Bisexuals Transsexuals and Queers

UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency

US: United States

INTRODUCTION

The slow disillusion of “postraciality,” the euphoria following the election of the first African American president of the United States, strengthened the idea that the nation had parted with its old ways regarding race, and gave way to conservative political roadblocks, to struggles for black intellectual leadership and to the consequent frustration of activists with no change in sight, with structural racism and disparate experiences with the police between the white majority and the black minority, even in Ferguson where this minority is the majority demographic, put an end to the already eroded trust in this supposedly new social era and triggered the start of its crumble.

The Black Lives Matter slogan had national and even international appeal, perceived by some as a hopeful wake-up call of young African Americans to come out of this belief in a racial golden age, and by others as a manifestation of powerlessness and hopelessness of black communities which had long been brewing masked by said belief. Although these interpretations do not entail the same ramifications, they paint the picture of a group reaction to the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, but also to a multitude of seemingly indirect causes which have in turn brought about this unjustified police killing. One key aspect to understanding the outreach the #blacklivesmatter demonstrated online during the Ferguson events is to account for its actions in the wake of previous police killings, notably following the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin in Sanford and more generally in 2012 and 2013 both on the ground and online: the Ferguson protests cannot be understood individually, and are rather another manifestation of an ongoing transition from street and online activism to a movement that was already taking form by the time activists took to the streets after the choking of Eric Garner at the hands of the police earlier in 2014. The reasons behind this outrage are much harder to pinpoint, but do have in common that they are perceived as inherent problems in the policing system and injustices part of an institutionally racist system, and could fit in loosely defined categories of systemic issues disproportionately affecting the black minority that BLM has blamed for the current racial disparities in the US, namely wealth disparity, income inequality, education gap, achievement gap, racially biased drug laws,¹ unequal targeting and treatment by the police, police brutality, mass incarceration and the removal of prisoners’ civil rights in all states but Maine and

1 Including differences in sentencing between crack and cocaine (see chapter 3.1), habitual offender (also known as three strikes) laws, other laws directly or indirectly causing disparate conviction rates between Whites and Blacks.

Vermont, either temporary in 37 or potentially permanent in 11.¹ They belong to three main categories: socioeconomic disparities, laws and policies perceived as unfair, and the way they are enforced. Beyond inherited lower social positions (less accumulated wealth and access to education in families over time), which remain and are still major grievances, the present situation is not simply the product of an older era that would now be considered as resolute. There still exists to this day a degree of oppression that accumulated wealth does not explain on its own. The black minority is under-represented in home ownership, academic achievement, employment, quality of employment and income, individual wealth, whereas in a “postracial” society only marks of past oppression would affect these metrics. (Brown University) Race, gender, wealth and location are interconnected factors of inequality and disparity of experience with the police. The 2008 subprime crisis was an economic disaster which brought about the under-funding of municipalities, leaving them scrambling for revenue, a nefarious consequence in direct causation with the social ills described previously. Municipalities like Ferguson, in an attempt to balance their budget, resorted to measures ranging from draconian to unconstitutional which exacerbated already existing practices discriminatory in both intent and impact.² A second, more direct consequence of the financial crisis was a drop in individual wealth and home ownership which was more acute for racial minorities.

The movement for Black Lives, to which Black Lives Matter appertains, can be said to be part of a long history of struggle, however it is not a logical, seamless continuation of the civil rights movement. There is a rupture in this chronology, and the fact it happened under an African American president and under an African American attorney general has everything to do with why it can be considered as a discontinuity: the civil rights movement sought to open the door to the possibility of political power for African Americans as a solution to these issues through civil rights, but what if even voting and having access to the highest seat of political power in the nation was not sufficient to bring about change? This movement is a social response to this disturbing question. With its outstanding reach, this newly founded movement seems to decry first and foremost a lack of representativity at all levels: at the federal level with dissenters vehemently criticizing Barack Obama on his avoidance of policing and race issues, at the state and municipal levels with activists pointing at unfair policing practices, and at the local level with a dissatisfaction with available activist groups. If the shooting of

1 For a detailed table, see: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx>.

2 “[...] a pattern of unconstitutional policing [...] procedures that raise due process concerns and inflict unnecessary harm [...] Ferguson’s own data establish clear racial disparities that adversely impact African Americans. The evidence shows discriminatory intent [...] undermining law enforcement legitimacy among African Americans in particular.” (Department of Justice Civil Rights Division). For a more detailed account, see chapter 1.2.

Michael Brown was the spark and social media the powder-keg, to what extent can the surrounding socioeconomic factors of the Obama era be said to have inevitably led to this flashpoint?

CHAPTER I: THE SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

1.1 The Election of Barack Obama and the Postraciality Myth

Despite the liberal hope that the election of Barack Obama would bring about the collapse of institutional racism and racist attitudes, the belief in the words of Martin Luther King regarding African Americans “not be[ing] judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”, in other words, moving past color in a “colorblind” (racially equal) society, did not crystallize beyond this belief. This is what Peniel E. Joseph considers a revelation of “[t]he Age of Obama” (130): by the end of Obama’s first term, race still mattered. Although very few seriously expected the end of race as a determining social component, the sobering reality was that the economic crisis became a priority and that even attempts at fixing known unfair laws and pitfalls for the black community like the Fair Sentencing Act only reduced existing inequalities.¹

Arguably, there were two main reactions to Obama’s being elected regarding his race: fear and pride. Fear is difficult to document, but some indications are available to us, such as massively increased traffic on websites known more specifically for their white-supremacist reputation.² This is likely connected to the belief that altering the social quo and giving special status to African Americans will hinder the personal advancement of these individuals, which was the case in 1985 in a report by Stanley Greenberg, a pollster studying democrats who had defected to Reagan’s party (Klinkner and Rogers, 304). Pride is a lot trickier. This sense of pride is not problematic *per se*, but blind pride in the nation’s ability to go beyond racial matters led to the creation of a potent and dangerous myth, that of postraciality. Both fear and this sense of postraciality may stem from a similar cause which is that of awkwardness around the question of race in America.

The concept of colorblindness was appropriated in a similar manner to how the figure of Martin Luther King was appropriated by former conservative president Ronald Reagan, or rather a trimmed down and more palatable version of Dr King, one to fit majority (white) standards and to alter MLK’s concept of racial equality as not to be an objective but a means to an end: for society to be equal in the end, everyone must be given the same amount of help. Of course, this is fundamentally the same as

1 See chapter 3.1

2 “After Obama won the presidency in defiance of these racial headwinds, traffic to the white-supremacist website Stormfront increased sixfold.” (Coates)

considering a flat tax “equal” on the basis that everyone is taxed the same: it becomes inherently flawed if society is not already equal. In simplistic terms, this meant society had to rid itself of federal aid, lest the “welfare queen” will never know self-help and hard work, consequently galvanizing already existing inequalities, but by the same token giving a justification for not attempting to remedy them. On the other hand, Reagan did notably leave non-black associated federal aid programs such as Social Security and Medicare untouched. (300) Political scientists Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers Smith found two dynamics to have been major in popularizing these arguments in the past: the waning of the Cold War (not as relevant under Reagan), and the resentment of the majority which accompanied the “transformation in American demography, institutions, and civil life”, and a white majority who “rightly felt themselves to be a less legally privileged and socially esteemed community than they had been in the past”. (289) Making a historical parallel would not be wholly accurate, however the social mechanisms at play are similar on paper: a fear of losing one’s privileged position and an attempt at ideologically justifying the maintaining of the status quo. The postracial myth associates the rather recent emergence of a black well-off class and the election of a black man to the highest office with a racially level playing field.

The notion of the postracial has the same narcotic, intoxicating, and seductive initial ring to it as other panacea terms of racial resolution like: colorblind, level playing field, tolerance, equality, and, the latest *expression du jour*, diversity. But, there is a crucial distinction to be drawn between postracial and these latter terms. The latter terms suggest some sort of future aspirational objective to be striven towards, and bring with them the further hope that these objectives are within reach —providing for a little determination and hard work on everyone’s part. The postracial, with its always significant prefix, suggests not only the kind of great progress that has ostensibly been made, but also, more seductively still, the dizzying prospect of an ideological endpoint that may have already been attained, if not, indeed, surpassed. Obviously, this desire to cathect the racial through the lens of the past — or post—found its apotheosis in Barack Obama’s election in 2008. (Stewart, 126)

It is indeed this assumption of change that makes postracialism such a potent myth. Its danger lies in its possible rhetorical justification of existing inequalities, much in the spirit of Reagan’s appropriating of MLK. It can be used to justify the deprioritization or denial of actual, topical issues, or to belittle said issues by either posing them as racism still being around but not being a “serious problem” anymore or as being “racism without racists”, making the assumption only explicit racism affects minorities and that racial inequalities are somehow unnoticeable, unchangeable and therefore acceptable (McWorther). It crystallizes a simplistic but demonstrably convincing connection between the possibility of black

success and the achievement of racial equality, either because of its perceived logic or because of the justifications it allows, serving as an enabling myth.

Another facet of this myth, which contributes and stems from the previously mentioned fear, is the belief that Obama would protect first and foremost African American interests, forcing him to swerve towards a more race-neutral tone for political reasons. One of the most obvious examples of this is the difference between the former Illinois Senator's rally in Howard University (one of the renowned historical black colleges) and his other rally speeches. Author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates highlights this discrepancy with irony: "He gave a good speech that day, paying heed to Howard's rituals, calling out its famous alumni, shouting out the university's various dormitories, and urging young people to vote. (His usual riff on respectability politics was missing.)" (Coates) In comparison, other campaign speeches such as "A More Perfect Union", in which Obama was treading a tightrope after ABC News posted a piece on his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, highlighting parts of his sermons that were deemed unamerican and controversial (Ross and El-Bury), marked his full awareness of the color politics at play. Even though the speech was commended for its rhetorical quality, its ambivalence was reproached to the president, and was especially voiced when African American activist groups started to rise up in 2012 and to decry the lack of change. Others saw this not just as a means to an end (burying the controversy) but also as a core precept of the president. Coates attributes Obama's overzealousness with colorblindness to his political obstacles, going as far as to call it "a matter of political survival", but also to his concept of American-ness, which goes beyond race. The juxtaposition of Obama's election with the emergence of these activist groups "signaled not so much the end of racial injustice in America, but its evolution" (Peniel, 132) and the leadership of the nation was not only seen as not enough, but also as paradoxically giving an argument for decredibilizing the racial lens. "It is one of history's supreme ironies (...) that those unheard voices demanding justice grew exponentially louder, while in many ways remaining invisible, during the time of the nation's first black president." (Peniel, 143)

1.2 The Ferguson Events

If there is one conclusive element to draw from Ferguson, it would have to be that the motivation for the protests was deeper than the shooting itself: it was a microcosm, regrouping many of the issues the movement for Black Lives has been and will be pointing at. The media coverage of the event provided a platform for a plethora of grievances that had been bottled up and investigations into the Ferguson police department ascertained the fact that Brown's death was, just like in other past cases, avoidable. The Ferguson events can be broken down into what led to the shooting of Michael Brown, the shooting itself and the ensuing protests. Our primary focus will be on the myriad of combined factors which made this shooting possible and reflected many recurring policing issues nationwide, but whose specificity made into a symbol of police harassment and brutality. The Ferguson protests sent shockwaves throughout the country and gave birth to a major movement for the protection of Black Lives, while at the same time not being the first tragedy of its kind. The shooting may have been the spark, but the passion it ignited and the activist groundwork at play seems to have stemmed from an accumulation of grievances over a period of time, and is likely to have gained in traction after the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012 by a civilian neighborhood watch coordinator.

Following an in-depth investigation of the Ferguson Police Department (FPD) and its court system, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice released a report providing much needed background and factual evidence of systemic violations of the law by the very body in charge of enforcing said laws. The city of Ferguson is one of the 89 municipalities in St Louis county, Missouri. 67% of its population was black in 2014 but only 13,5% of the officers were African Americans, and all court staff (municipal Judge, court clerk, prosecuting attorney, and all assistant court clerks) were white (Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 6). It is relevant to note there was a nearly 50% increase in the number of citations given when comparing the records from 2010 and those from 2014. Moreover, this increase was not driven by a rise in serious crime, which remained at a constant level. This is believed to have resulted from the city's focus on revenue, attempting to increase its revenue by relying more and more on municipal funding through law enforcement (fees, citations and bond money), despite denying these allegations in response to a post-shooting Bloomberg article (Smith, 2014) on the basis that it only represented 12% of the city's revenue for that fiscal year. Indeed, the startling increase in revenue and budget share from fines and fees seems to corroborate this hypothesis. Another hypothesis, which is not part of the report, would be that the city was trying to recuperate during the aftermath of the subprime crisis. As the report highlights, Ferguson had suffered from a stark

decline in sales tax. Revenue from fines and fees skyrocketed from 2011 to 2012 with a 49,6% increase, increasing again by 16,6% the following year and forecasting a 6,9% increase from 2013 to 2014, even when excluding “some minor municipal court fees”. To give a better sense of perspective, these increases were only minor before this change in strategy, with a comparatively trivial 2,2% increase in 2010-2011. (9)

The municipal court system suffered from a number of issues, ranging from worrisome infringements on due process to issuing outright unlawful and unconstitutional search and arrest warrants. The court staff was overburdened with an unmanageable amount of offenses pending, as filed cases piled up, of which only part would be resolved. The court was put into a situation where it had to consider 1200 to 1500 offenses in a single session on average (with a session “lasting no more than three hours”). Most charges were resolved without trial, and the court system encouraged a speedy resolution. Not having enough money or otherwise not being able to pay for a fine in time incurred a municipal warrant leading to an arrest and even more filings, a vicious cycle which seemed to be a significant issue both for the residents and for court staff.¹ (8-9)

This brings us to a second major issue with the way FPD enforced its laws: its arbitrary, at times even unlawful policing.

FPD officers routinely conducted stops that have little relation to public safety and a questionable basis in law”. The investigation reveals FPD relied heavily on vague charges, meaning potentially unconstitutional stops, citations and arrests. “Frequently, officers stop people without reasonable suspicion or arrest them without probable cause. Officers rely heavily on the municipal “Failure to Comply” charge, which appears to be facially unconstitutional in part, and is frequently abused in practice. FPD also relies on a system of officer-generated arrest orders called “wanteds” that circumvents the warrant system and poses a significant risk of abuse. The data show, moreover, that FPD misconduct in the area of stops and arrests disproportionately impacts African Americans”. (16) (...) “In reviewing FPD records, we found numerous incidents in which—based on the officer’s own description of the detention—an officer detained an individual without articulable reasonable suspicion of criminal activity or arrested a person without probable cause. In none of these cases did the officer explain or justify his conduct. (17)

1 “The court may conduct trials, although it does so rarely, and most charges are resolved without one. (...) the court issues arrest warrants when a person misses a court appearance or fails to timely pay a fine. As a result, violations that would normally not result in a penalty of imprisonment can, and frequently do, lead to municipal warrants, arrests, and jail time. (...) As the number of charges initiated by FPD has increased in recent years, the size of the court’s docket has also increased. According to data the City reported to the Missouri State Courts Administrator, at the end of fiscal year 2009, the municipal court had roughly 24,000 traffic cases and 28,000 non-traffic cases pending. As of October 31, 2014, both of those figures had roughly doubled to 53,000 and 50,000 cases, respectively. In fiscal year 2009, 16,178 new cases were filed, and 8,727 were resolved. In 2014, by contrast, 24,256 new offenses were filed, and 10,975 offenses were resolved.” (8-9)

There was also the issue of made-up municipal charges, including the one referred to as “ped checks”. The report mentions ‘a pattern of suspicionless, legally unsupportable stops [the investigators] found documented in FPD’s records, described by FPD as “ped checks” or “pedestrian checks.”’ (18), which are in no way constitutional. This went unquestioned by officers, a nefarious consequence giving way to an unlawful stop-and-frisk policy.

Officers invoke[d] the term “ped check” as though it has some unique constitutional legitimacy. It does not. Officers may not detain a person, even briefly, without articulable reasonable suspicion. Terry, 392 U.S. at 21. To the extent that the words “ped check” suggest otherwise, the terminology alone is dangerous because it threatens to confuse officers’ understanding of the law. (18)

When combined, the addition of baseless arrests and disregard for due and legal process gave even greater abuses, such as violations of habeas corpus, with “unclear and inconsistent” bond practices (with their amounts rarely being reviewed by the Judge, which is not the norm), unlawful detentions of persons for more than 72 hours, and occasional ignoring of bail payments – persons who might have been unlawfully arrested in the first place. (60) Perhaps one of the most scandalous aspects of this report is the picture it paints of a profound racial issue with FPD’s policing. African Americans were overly targeted, ended up with more citations in comparable situations, were overly represented in the crime numbers while being part of the demographic that is the least likely to be able to pay the consequent fines. “Despite making up 67% of the population, African Americans accounted for 85% of FPD’s traffic stops, 90% of FPD’s citations, and 93% of FPD’s arrests from 2012”, which is disparate even when amounting for criminality rates of African American residents of Ferguson, they were also 2,07 times as likely to be searched during a stop despite being 26% less likely to have contraband found on them. African Americans are also “68% less likely than others to have their cases dismissed by the Municipal Judge”. (64) Another aspect of this discrepancy is the pattern of excessive use of force, with the overwhelming majority (almost 90%) used against African Americans. FPD documentation reveals force was used liberally, with some self-admittedly strictly retaliatory uses documented as reasonable. (28-29)

A third and final reproach that was made to FPD was that their prejudiced approach eroded their own legitimacy in the eyes of the public, ultimately making policing less effective, less safe for the residents as well as for the officers, a well-documented correlation. (Sherman) The perceived lack of professionalism of some officers and court staff, and the resentment of African American citizens both

living in and passing through the city as they felt treated differently on average in similar situations compared to their white counterparts. (Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 17-18)

Minor incidents which are common nationwide but aren't generally perceived as major, such as writing off a ticket for a friend or colleague, were perceived as furthering double standards since all court staff was white and a tiny minority of the police force was black. (74) This was due to the blatant lack of diversity and representativity of the city's residents. Racist joke emails were found during the investigations and, although insignificant, they paint a picture when combined with more explicit evidence of racial prejudice. The content of interviews and emails seem to highlight a belief in officers and court employees that African Americans do not integrate well, rent in the city but work elsewhere, and are therefore not fully part of the community and lack in personal responsibility as a result, despite not benefiting from as much leniency from the Judge or from as many write-offs as the white demographic. Although the colorblindness myth is not mentioned in the report, it was observed that representing the black community as less responsible allowed officers and court staff to disown their participation to their estrangement and abuse. A pattern of unconstitutional repression of filming and taking pictures of officers in the line of duty was observed and depicted a clear policy against transparency, in some cases resulting in unlawful arrests. (26) Furthermore, the fact bond amounts were seldom reviewed by the Judge and the arbitrariness experienced participated in delegitimizing the work of the courts, problems which were well-known by top officials as well as residents (74-75), leading to abyssal levels of cooperating with police, especially among youths, which could be linked to a defiant reaction to the perceived illegitimacy of FPD. (Sherman)

The municipal focus on generating revenue, police practices, municipal court practices and both rumored and factual racial bias caused distrust and drove the community and its law enforcement apart. In other words, it doesn't take every officer in a precinct for that precinct to be delegitimized. Some of FPD's practices have been considered unfair, whether usually tolerated in the rest of the nation or not, and aggravated already existing racial tensions and multiplying baseless altercations with African Americans which were also made more likely to escalate. It is an accumulation of factors constituting a racially biased police department and court system, whether its officers and staff acted in bad faith or not, ending up in a tragedy.

1.3 The Subprime Crisis and Ferguson

For many, Obama's election meant cities were back on Washington's agenda. "Who better to address the challenges of American cities than a president who had spent his formative years in Jakarta and Honolulu, attended college in Los Angeles and New York, and lived nearly his entire adult life in Chicago?" (Sugrue, 146) Obama had quite the record in Chicago, from his work as an organizer in Chicago's South Side to his political career as state senator. He faced even more of a challenge after the 2000 redistricting, and managed both wealthy areas such as the Gold Coast, as well as poorer, black-majority neighborhoods. (146) Executive Order 13503, proclaiming the creation of an Office of Urban Affairs was another sign of Obama's intentions of seriously considering focusing on the country's infrastructure, inner city community divides, gentrification, and *de facto* segregation problems: in short, there was a lot to be hopeful about. With all of this in mind, one has to remember the economic context of the time: uncertainty, an inevitable drop in sales tax revenue as people started to watch their spending, and tourists who became scarce as a consequence of the global economic slowdown. Developing and struggling businesses had to bear the brunt of a massive credit crunch, not to mention more than half of subprime loans went to African Americans in 2006, or that minorities will take longer to recover, as "borrowers of color [were] more than twice as likely to lose their home as white households, (...) [reflecting] the fact that African Americans and Latinos were consistently more likely to receive high-risk loan products, even after accounting for income and credit status." (Gruenstein et al., 3) Many American cities struggled to come back from the consequences of the crisis, and were put in dangerously difficult financial situations (for context, the city of Detroit had declared bankruptcy in 2013), which caused some to rely on alternative ways of raising revenue, all of which would heavily impact the already impoverished through the increase of service fees and fines. (Sugrue, 146)

Ferguson became a national whodunit. One of the causes that is not usually explored in relation to this social disaster is another one of its kind: the subprime crisis. In spite of the fact the Obama administration was estimated to have ensured 2 to 3 million Americans kept their jobs and softened the blow to the economy and to cities to an extent (Rauchway, 40) with the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (even the diverted funds to bail out banks turned out a profit down the line (34)), the sharp decline in sales tax based revenue encouraged police departments such as Ferguson's to rely more on military surplus, and added pressure to find funds to mitigate this budget deficit, leading to the previously mentioned shortcuts and predatory tactics focused on "generating revenue". It should also be mentioned that the mayor and the police chief played a key role, a fact

highlighted by emails found during the Justice Department subpoena explicitly mentioning making up for this shortfall with an increase in both the number and the amount of fees and fines. (10)

Indirectly, this financial crisis deepened the wealth gap between white and black populations nationwide, which was much more visible in Ferguson where the black minority is in fact the local majority demographic (67% of the town's population at the time of the report in March 2015, compared to the 14.004% national average four months after the report (United States Census Bureau)).

Using publicly available SIPP data, Professor William Darity Jr. demonstrated using stratification economics applied to median individual wealth (assets minus debt) that racial minorities were hit harder when the market collapsed in 2008.¹ When comparing these values, we notice a 16,3% median individual wealth decrease (from \$142,335 to \$119,152) for white individuals between 2005 and 2009, but a 52,6% decrease (from \$12,840 to \$6,081) for black individuals. In more cognitively manageable terms, in 2005 the black minority nationwide had \$0,09 in relative holdings per \$1 of the white majority. This became \$0,05 for every \$1 in 2009, and \$0,06 in 2011, three years after the collapse. (Brown University) The deepening of these already abyssal levels of racial inequality aggravated existing tensions, not to mention it superposed a social climate of "postraciality" where class was said to trump race and racial wealth equality was believed to only be a matter of time. On top of being a sharper decrease for the black population, this sudden change combined with the preexisting inequalities fostered further racial unrest, and created part of the conditions that led to the Ferguson events, including the side effects of a decrease in wealth over a short period of time. The massive increase in the amount of fines and the predatory policing at the source of this increase was the straw that broke the camel's back under an already unsustainable situation of massive credit crunch and further impoverishment of low-income households.

1.4 Toward a Movement

Beyond the dwindling of the socioeconomic conditions of African Americans due to the 2008 crisis and its aftermath, it was first and foremost the media storm (mainly local news, community gatherings and social media) around concrete events that allowed for the crystallization of the growing feelings of insecurity and injustice. This transition from burrowed anger to outrage may have seemed sudden on August 9 2014, but accounts from historians and testimonies from activists say otherwise.

¹ See William Darity Jr.'s lecture (Brown University) on why stratification economics best explain the racial wealth gap (11:50) and on the link between the subprime crisis and the racial wealth gap (22:43).

On the contrary, these feelings had been brewing over a period of time and found a cornerstone in Ferguson. Interestingly enough, the ensuing protests are often associated with an eruption (Hooker, 2; Taylor, 166-169) a fitting metaphor.

Although it is necessary to mention Obama did not have a direct responsibility in these events, and the presidency of another candidate at the time, whether on the democratic or republican side, would probably not have altered history, African Americans resented the very knowledge that everything in their democratic arsenal had been thrown at racial inequality for that effort to fail, including two terms under a black president. Some scholars have connected these “unjust forms of democratic suffering” with the unconventional and violent means of protesting that were used. (Hooker, 2)

This process has been compared by historians to the process behind the creation of the black freedom movement, not simply as a direct reaction to any one shooting but a long process, starting with protesting specific events and moving on to a larger assault on norms, which these activists associate with the cause of these outraging events. (Kazin, 251) The norms contested however are not so comparable, as these movements drew inspiration from past movements but were also critical of them, with BLM finding past black nationalism too narrow-minded and in compliance with hetero-patriarchal norms, for example. (Kazin, 251)

Of course, this wave of protests was not conjured up out of thin air. These activists were groups before becoming a movement, and participated in lesser known actions and workshops before becoming groups. There are testimonies of teach-ins during the 2011 Occupy movement as part of the “Occupy the Hood” initiative, which attempted to bring the racial elements of inequality to the attention of the poorer black-majority neighborhoods in Chicago, an issue wider than, but also related to, race. They also focused on problems which would become central to the future movement, such as stop-and-frisk policies (previously mentioned “ped checks” in Ferguson). There was also the protest following the innocent verdict in the case of George Zimmerman’s shooting of black teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, which brought about the creation of multiple groups that would have a role in the future movement including Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100) centered in Chicago. (Taylor, 160-164) To a wider extent, this activist groundwork helped provide an alternative against the idea that irresponsibility was a facet of black culture and a justification for the problems Blacks were facing, a contestation at the center of the Ferguson events.

Occupy Wall Street in New York had a “people of color working group” whose entire purpose was to organize around antiracist issues with the intent of drawing more Blacks and other people of color into the movement. Occupy Chicago organized teach-ins called “Racism in Chicago,” “Our Enemies in Blue,” and “Evictions and Foreclosures.” Most significantly, Black Occupy activists organized “Occupy the Hood,” whose goal was to raise the profile of the Occupy movement in communities of color across the country and widen the range of people involved. Some “Occupy the Hood” organizers had also been involved in organizing against “stop-and-frisk.” Thus, not only did Occupy popularize economic and class inequality in the United States by demonstrating against corporate greed, fraud, and corruption throughout the finance industry, it also helped to make connections between those issues and racism. The public discussion over economic inequality rendered incoherent both Democratic and Republican politicians’ insistence on locating Black poverty in Black culture. While it obviously did not bury the arguments for culture and “personal responsibility,” Occupy helped to create the space for alternative explanations within mainstream politics, including seeing Black poverty and inequality as products of the system. (Taylor 159-160)

Although Ferguson is the explicit advent of the movement, it is comparable to the tip of an iceberg. There is no clear-cut date for the trigger that set this process in motion, but rather combinations of socioeconomic factors and a series of events perceived as racially unfair which provided occasions for developing activist networks around specific occurrences, or microcosms, for larger issues. It is unclear whether Occupy constitutes a sensible historical start-date (groundwork and experience), or if the protest following the shooting of Trayvon Martin does (building a community around the theme of police brutality), or even if the first occurrence of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag in 2013 trumps the other two (the launch of the BLM initiative by Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors). What is clear however, is that these were steps in a similar direction, steps toward a movement, which crystallized and genuinely gained momentum when an example of everything these activists had been denouncing manifested in the form of the microcosm that was Ferguson.

One major impact Ferguson had was to bring to light how much the First Amendment right to videotape or otherwise document police arrests as a member of the public was disregarded (and even wrongly treated as an unlawful interference in some cases), which massively increased the amount of recordings and their credibility in the eyes of the public nationwide, providing a medium for victims and more transparency into policing. The combination of this medium and of the groundwork provided by activists wound up in a new, albeit unconventional, democratic tool: making justice public, with both online activism and street protests. (165)

CHAPTER II: A NEW MOVEMENT

2.1 Why “Black” Lives Matter

A potential flaw in the rallying cry and group name was exploited due to its apparent lack of inclusiveness at the group’s early stages, leading other groups and communities to antagonize this slogan while not exactly opposing what the movement stands for ideologically (racial equality, fairness of justice and law enforcement), but while being critical of the movement’s radical positions overall through the use of “X Lives Matter”. All Lives Matter was a popular counter-slogan to Black Lives Matter during its early stages, and was even used by 2016 presidential candidate Hilary Clinton, whose initial intent was probably to temperate this message, this nonetheless sparked controversy at the time as she was accused of missing the point behind the message of the BLM slogan, and to spread this misinterpretation, consciously or not. (Rappeport) This was also the case with the Blue Lives Matter group, Blue referring to the color of uniformed police officers.

In 2014, two police officers were killed in New York City, and the social movement faced its strongest backlash from police in that city. The police officers were killed in late December 2014 by Ismaaiyl Brinsley. (...) After the police shootings, the mayor of New York called for a moratorium on protests, and the Patrolman’s Benevolent Association (PBA) and right-wing media argued that Black Lives Matter was responsible for the killings. Black Lives Matters officially condemned the shooting deaths of the two police officers (Hanson, 2014). PBA President Patrick Lynch noted, “There’s blood on many hands tonight—those that incited violence on the street under the guise of protests, that tried to tear down what New York City police officers did every day” (Petersen-Smith, 2015, § 9). Moreover, the PBA has appropriated the language from Black Lives Matter to confront injustice and created “Blue Lives Matter.” (Clayton, 454-455)

This Blue Lives Matter call was furthered by many online, including co-founder of pro-police group Humanizing The Badge, Mike Edwards or “Mike the Cop” on YouTube.¹ The counter-slogan was in turn perceived as antagonistic by some BLM members and supporters. An *Ebony* senior editor claimed this statement did not have a purpose since “the system” has never suggested otherwise – quite the opposite in fact.’ (Clayton, 455)

¹ “Mike the Cop” notably went on the record on his YouTube channel to criticize one of BLM’s activists, Shaun King, for posting fake or altered stories of police encounters on his Twitter account.

This originates from the fact this is often considered an *über-alles* statement (in other words: black lives matter...more than other lives), which is not the case. The statement “Black Lives” is not meant as a statement of Black Supremacy. This misinterpreting, whether conscious or not, led to the opposite reproduction of this statement. This is not to be interpreted as a fight for whose life matters most since none of these groups, even though individual supporters might claim so, are defending the superiority of their race/profession/community over that of others. They all have in common that they are seeking to “humanize” and to bring forward the grievances they perceive against their race/profession/community, with the difference with Blue Lives Matter that their group identity is built against the perceived group identity of Black Lives Matter, or what they are perceived to stand for, but its core idea of the need for equality in the face the justice system or law enforcement system is not contested.

The term “Black”, beyond its literal reference to skin tone, seems to harbor a much wider and blurrier identity than initially expected. The group also attracted migrants of other origins and American Hispanics, and others beyond the African American community, although the majority of members identified with this community during its emergence. This may have been a progressive shift as the issues they came to tackle also became more relevant to other minorities in the US. Despite this reference to blackness, it is also made clear in the group’s agenda and in the demands presented through the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) platform in 2016 that their targeted demographic is the less financially secure which encompasses a majority of, but not all, the black minority, aiming not only for anti-racism policies but also for anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism policies. This is in line with a growing awareness among black citizens of the widening gap between the values of the more affluent black communities and the less affluent ones. (Taylor, 19-20)

Notwithstanding all the controversies it sparked, this unspecific strategy can be referred to as issue framing, and has been touted in the past for providing a context along which to articulate demands. (Clayton, 462) Framing the issue around the problem of the perceived disposability of black lives provides a justification for more specific domestic changes affecting black people living in the US directly this time, such as those demanded in their earlier 2015 Campaign Zero or in the more extensive M4BL online platform in 2016 along with over 50 groups: “policies on taxes, reparations, military budget, education, incarceration (...), police conduct”, even basing some of these demands on concrete studies with “[s]ome of its planks [having been] borrowed from the think-tank Demos and other liberal organizations.” (Kazin, 251)

The catalyst for BLM was the fact the police is relied upon too much in America, and that some of their methods are dangerous and inefficient with little accountability (not to mention the further protections provided by police union contracts and qualified immunity), despite having diversified the issues it finds with the status quo. Broken windows policing (previously known as zero tolerance), an urban policing classic based on the idea broken windows in a neighborhood indicate poor policing and that minor misdemeanors are tolerated (in theory leading to more serious crime in the area), has been designated as one of the reasons behind the deep flaws which brought about this American policing crisis. Its main application is the increase of patrols in targeted “hot-spot” areas based on statistical crime data. There have been attempts at replacing broken windows policing with community policing: a theory which on paper would rely more on forming community ties (knowing who works late and is therefore supposed to be coming home at 1 in the morning and who is probably from out of town and potentially suspicious) and cooperation rather than constant patrolling and harassment. Unfortunately, these attempts have either supplemented broken windows policing or have been misimplemented. Los Angeles and its LAPD are a prime example of positive initiatives being overshadowed by the constant relying on broken windows and the ramping up of police militarization through the increased use of their SWAT teams, and even so these initiatives were criticized as being a form of bribing senior citizens for information down the road, comparable to strategies employed in the war in Iraq. (Gilmore and Gilmore, 167-170) In Oakland, another community policing initiative failed as superiors interfered with the new police unit, and the delegating of responsibilities lured some residents into a sense of “official vigilantism” that worsened owner-renter tensions. In Denver, a system of optional mediation between the officer and the victim was put in place for cases of racially charged arrests, but accepting the mediation process would cancel a potential Internal Affairs investigation (as an incentive to the officer to accept mediation), but in effect allowed officers to get away with inappropriate behavior and racially charged arrests. (Mitchell et al., 226-230) In the face of the inefficiency of police reform, BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors took the radical position of advocating for an *in fine* abolition of the police, while still positioning herself in favor of police reform. (Heatherton, 40) However, the main issues were framed as the prevalence of neighborhood vigilantes (Trayvon Martin shooting in Sanford), the disproportionate rate of targeting black residents (Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson), and general unnecessary police violence.

The use of the term “Black” is not without significance: it draws its origins in a culture of black pride and black group identity which particularly developed in the 60s and 70s at the height of the civil

rights movement. It asserts that this group identity, based on the common experience of being perceived as black and possibly in conjunction with a common ethnicity although not necessarily, is a key component of its individuals' identities and therefore a base for solidarity against a common source of injustice between its members. However, "Lives" involves a plurality of identities and a denial of a black monolithic identity, which could be associated with the black nationalism movement of the 70s, and a spotlight on those who are perceived to fall victim to injustice and persecution the most (even among their own community): non hetero-normative gender identities, the financially precarious, and the incarcerated are prime examples. Its common sonority to black panther also brings out the readiness of its members to use unconventional means. The statement itself is meant as a shock factor and implies that in the status quo black lives do not matter and are disposable.

2.2 Rejection of Top-down Representativity

As with other politically active groups (the Tea Party at its early stages in 2009 for example), BLM takes pride in its grassroots origins. A group starting from a gathering for and by the people is a symbolically powerful origin story in a deeply democratic ideology that is relatable with most in America. Additionally, looking back at other successful groups in history with similar aims allows to project oneself beyond the current protest.

Historian Donna Murch's testimony would even place the Ferguson protests as a continuation of the larger movement for the civil rights of African Americans in the US.

The call repeated over and over is Stokely Carmichael's: 'Organize, Organize, Organize.' And this growing youth movement has all the ancestral sweetness of kinship. In the words of a local hip-hop artist/activist, 'Our grandparents would be proud of us.' (Murch)

While it is clear inspiration was drawn from this historic movement, the use of protesting methods reminiscent of the civil rights era such as Freedom Rides for example (Taylor, 172-173), there is also a case for the opposite. In many ways the Ferguson protesters and the groups comprised in M4BL have broken away from the civil rights movement in an inner battle for meaning between the spiritual "elders" of this long-standing movement and the younger generation. (171) Its model is entirely different, a decision that was taken in defiance of "traditional" groups, which interestingly enough are continuations of groups and group models from the civil rights era. BLM has notably chosen to distance themselves from figures such as Rev. Al Sharpton (founder and president of the National

Action Network or NAN) and other members of the black intellectual elite who favored the return of law and order during the Ferguson protests by involving the federal government for example. These networks have tended to focus on specific legal cases instead of connecting issues with policing to broader social criticisms and were perceived as silencing figures, using rhetoric reminiscent of respectability politics and even caricaturing the protesters. In December, days after a grand jury decided not to indict the officer responsible for Eric Garner's death, the requirement of VIP or press passes (183) to attend a pre-march forum in Washington DC drove a wedge between the organic Baltimore, Staten Island, and Ferguson protests' leaderships and the NAN's leadership.

Top-down representativity was resented, and Sharpton also reportedly gave an impression of trying to nip the rebellion in the bud on behalf of the authorities for his own political gain, and to appropriate the figure of Michael Brown in front of his friends and families, painting the protesters as desecrating his memory by causing unrest. Major civil rights figures were even suspected of trying to acquire influence and to regrow the "civil rights establishment", composed of the main civil rights groups such as the historic National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (or NAACP) under the leadership of Cornell William Brooks or the NAN under the leadership of Al Sharpton, by quelling the protests.

Even though Sharpton had just arrived in town, he was describing Mike Brown's character and personality to his friends and peers. It was condescending and presumptuous. Sharpton's words also lent legitimacy to Ferguson officials' accounts, which blamed violence on protestors even as police blatantly violated their rights to assemble. But Sharpton's plan transcended events in Ferguson: if he could quell the fires of Ferguson, his political value would increase exponentially. (Taylor 172-173)

There is little doubt Sharpton had a longer-term vision and acted in good faith: successful non-violent protests tend to boost support among protesters and outside of the protesting group (Thomas and Winnifred, 272-273), which would have potentially allowed for a more widely acceptable resolution of conflict. There was a decent case for establishing Sharpton as a conflict solver, which could have positioned him as a reliable middleman in contact with decision-makers, and made it easier to enforce demands as part of negotiations. The protesters chose a different path, and this signified the beginning of the erosion of trust in top-down representatives for BLM. Their rejection of a clear leadership at the top planning ahead was criticized by a large part of the black intellectual and media elite, with figures such as Oprah Winfrey (major media figure and philanthropist), Carol Swain (political sciences and law professor), and Glen Loury (economist). (Clayton, 457)

On the one hand BLM members drew their inspiration from and still admire this legendary civil rights establishment for what it used to represent. The main argument of the “elders” is a cautious one: the need for “the clergy and the lawyers and the legislators” (Taylor, 46), that beyond street protests, what a group really needs is a coalition that can apply pressure beyond their base. (Paybarah) On the other hand the sobering reality of its history of focusing mainly on black heterosexual men and its moralizing tone, its political position (close to the authorities) and its long-term approach drew a wedge between what would be referred to as “the old guard” and the new movement.

2.3 A Dynamic Model

Early on, BLM chose to focus on the (relatively) specific issue of police brutality, a theme that lends itself well to the sharing of testimonies, pictures, and recordings of police encounters. The potent viral (not to mention psychologically impacting) quality of the material shared combined well with the ease of sharing social media platforms (mainly Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr) provide. (Leach and Allen)

Mundt, Ross and Burnett have identified three main components not only essential to successful activist groups but responsible for BLM’s online success: “meaning making” (creating a sense of common identity and cause), “resource mobilization” (page administrators ready to put in the time, crowdfunding) and “member recruitment” (social networking). (Mundt et al., 2)

Drawing on previous research, drumming up social capital through social media is more sustainable as an organizational force than using more traditional means. (2) Interestingly enough, some BLM online groups have restricted their pages more than others, a necessity born out of the need to monitor their platforms for trolling or aggressive opposition rhetoric (11), which is not fundamentally against the principle of their grassroots group identity but shows compromise nonetheless.

The group as a whole is divided in multiple chapters, a common strategy adopted by other activist organizations (“local units” in the NAACP, “chapters” in the NAN) whose main purpose is to grow a geographically close-by community to facilitate local organizing. Establishing a clear difference between BLM as a slogan and BLM as an actual group can be difficult: the platform used is the same but the demands tend to vary. Some issues are more relevant to certain chapters due to the specificity of the local situation, not to mention that in other nations the issues can be completely re-framed and share little with actual BLM domestic demands. In the words of DeRay McKesson, a BLM organizer:

It is not that we're anti-organization. There are structures that have formed as a result of protest, that are really powerful. It is just that you did not need those structures to begin protest. You are enough to start a movement. Individual people can come together around things that they know are unjust. And they can spark change. Your body can be part of the protest; you don't need a VIP pass to protest. And Twitter allowed that to happen (...) I think that what we are doing is building a radical new community in struggle that did not exist before. Twitter has enabled us to create community. I think the phase we're in is a community-building phase. Yes, we need to address policy, yes, we need to address elections; we need to do all those things. But on the heels of building a strong community. (Berlatsky)

As Dewey M. Clayton's literature review highlights, a multitude of groups share a group identity similar to BLM's and ended up merging with larger groups. The sudden media coverage combined with local outrage gave way to the emergence of multiple activist groups, some of which have been successful and have gone on to partake in the M4BL, and some which have now subsided and eventually stopped all activity, an example being Ferguson October (later renamed Ferguson Action) and their hashtag #shutitdown, a group resharing the #blacklivesmatter and engaging in strikingly similar rhetoric according to a web archive of their now defunct website, one of the many small groups which merged with BLM down the line. Members of such groups likely joined other more prominent groups in the movement (including BLM) as theirs lost momentum.

This new model also fills a need for an activist network that has been sought after by a younger generation with new interests and a different outlook on power structures. With the groundwork already laid down and a large following, BLM was a concept with a potential memberbase eager to join, given the already widespread interest for activism. The younger politically-minded found "mainstream" movements too restrictive, leaving members to feel like numbers but not like actual members with a voice.

This is very different from national organizations like the NAACP, NAN, or even Jackson's Operation PUSH, whose mostly male leaders make decisions with little input or direction from people on the ground. (...) an older model that privileged leveraging connections and relationships within the establishment over street activism—or using street protests to gain leverage within the establishment. (Taylor, 181-182)

A common misconception about the civil rights movement is that it had always been a top-down and stable, well-coordinated group. This was not always the case. In fact, much of the movement relied on less organized student unions, driven by the political atmosphere of their universities, and other young protesters driven by political motives.

Although Black Lives Matter has relied on social media, the civil rights movement relied on the energy and enthusiasm of young people. During the infancy of the civil rights movement, four African American male college students sat in at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960. They were there to protest Jim Crow laws in the South that segregated lunch counters, and were criticized by some Black people and White liberals as being too radical (Dreier, 2015). Within weeks, the sit-in movement began spreading throughout cities in the South, and the nation with Black and White students engaged in nonviolent passive resistance. Frank Porter Graham, former United States Senator and president of the University of North Carolina, added that the "black protestors are 'in their day and generation renewing springs of American democracy, . . . sitting down they are standing up for the American dream'" (Sitkoff, 2008, p. 80). In 2 months, over 300 Black and White college students from across the nation would meet at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, and form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Ella Baker, a SCLC advisor to the students, openly told them to be independent of older groups and to set their own goals. Diane Nash, a student at Fisk University who led the Nashville Student Movement, would later remark that "the media and history refer to it as Martin Luther King's movement, but young people should realize that it was people just like them, their age, that formulated goals and strategies, and actually developed the movement" (J. Williams, 2013, p. 184). (Clayton, 455-456)

In light of a modernized 1992 take and review of analyses using Gamson's sample comprised of 53 US protest groups "sometime during the period 1800-1945" (Frey et al., 368-369) on what protest groups were the most successful and therefore how protest groups ensure their own success, it is possible to estimate the theoretical advantages and disadvantages of this model.

One of the main advantages of BLM is its group identity, as its position as the all-encompassing "face" of the wider movement, echoing but also pulling together other similarly minded groups theoretically solves the problem of factionalism: "the adverse effects of factionalism are consistent across samples and are stronger than the effects of any other variable except displacement goals. Factionalism reduces the resources available to each faction and diverts available resources from use in the struggle against opponents outside the group". (371) One must however keep in mind two key aspects: the first being that the issue of over-representativity of young black heterosexual males remained an issue for the group, as we will broach in the next part, and secondly that another social researcher, Goldstone, would not establish factionalism as having any impact on group success within that same sample, attributing it to the fact displacement goals were not considered as a control variable and to the fact factionalism was accounted for independently from other control variables in Gamson's original analysis. (371-372)

As to the organizational criticisms the group has suffered, Goldstone would argue that bureaucracy delays success and that groups are more likely to emerge successful during national crises: the problem is not so much tactical or organizational as long as a group can sustain itself until a crisis emerges. (371-372) There is more to how successful an activist group will become than “what” the groups do specifically, there is also “when” and “where” they do it, and BLM’s decentralized model allows, on paper, for an overwhelming, enduring and potentially nation-wide presence, despite the lack of control over “what” is done. The massive impact of the Ferguson protests following the groundwork activists have laid out before Ferguson would confirm this theoretical assessment, and a similar case can be made for the more recent Minneapolis protests.

The group has indeed come under fire for structure-related problems such as its lack of long-term planning, which could echo a genuine concern given that displacement goals reduce the chances of succeeding of the protest groups involved in Gamson’s sample by “perhaps 40%” (383) according to the authors of the study, and that “all nondisplacement groups were successful” in Goldstone’s take. (371) Later on, BLM did come up with an early “Campaign Zero” 10 point plan in 2015 following criticisms, and built on these demands incorporating to this policing reform agenda a radical economic agenda in 2016 with other groups from M4BL.¹

2.4 Inclusivity and Resentment of Over-representativity

Near the end of the 90s conservative turn, the Million Man March in 1995 was perceived to have overwhelmingly focused its attention on the problems of black heterosexual men, and was majorly represented by men on the day of the rally due to asking women to stay home to cater to the needs of the children, leading to only a small fraction of women attending among them. Once envisioned as integral to the advancement of black rights and a key base of the larger movement for racial equality under the civil rights movement, women had been relegated to the side as if they had or were now playing a lesser role. BLM was founded under the guidance of Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza, all queer black women, in a move away from the more classic “black heterosexual male at the top”, and was supposed to fill a need for a group encompassing all black lives, meaning a better representation for women and LGBTQ than with traditional groups. On the surface the group seemed to have failed to solve this representativity crisis as the protests essentially crystallized around

¹ These latter demands are to this day considered too radical and therefore their economic program (focusing heavily on redistribution) has been criticized for being politically infeasible.

the deaths of black males. The absence of a centralized communication filter and the absolute freedom to protest a given issue as long as one has the numbers to organize a rally exposed lingering flaws.

In effect, derived movements and rallies such as the Say Her Name rally highlighted a resentment and fear of being eclipsed by male counterparts. The use of a different, more feminist-oriented slogan hinted at an inner struggle for representativity, which could stem from the fact the “martyrs” chosen by the movement are predominantly male, leaving part of BLM’s base with a feeling of being under-acknowledged and of being considered as suffering less from the protested issues because this suffering is not as visible in rallies. “The names of Rekia Boyd, Shelly Frey, Miriam Carey, and Alberta Spruill are less familiar than those of Mike Brown or Eric Garner, but their killings were motivated by the same dehumanizing factors.” (Taylor, 177) Furthermore, BLM’s critical account of how the police influences black lives goes beyond police killings, and also envelops the impact of discrimination, brutality and unfair sentencing on the community of the lost or altered black life, which has been more difficult to establish as a form of black suffering than actual martyrdom.

In a Takepart article, Rachel Gilmer, associate director of the African American Policy Forum, links this to the prevalence of African American male suffering in both federal discourse¹ and street protests.

Across the board, all the way up from the White House’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative down to the grassroots movements that we’ve seen rise in this country in response to state violence, men and boys are seen as the primary target of racial injustice. This has led to the idea that women and girls of color are not doing as bad, or that we’re not at risk at all. (Danielle)

This exacerbates the limits of a wide group identity: everyone may not feel as adequately represented as they believe they should. Even though BLM was kick-started by women, and that chapters and other groups of the M4BL platform have women among their leaders, this historically-rooted fear remains, demonstrating the uncomfortable reality of tensions within African American communities on gender issues. One could argue fighting too vehemently against the core idea of normative black masculinity and hetero-normality, still very much prevalent in African American urban culture, could be counter-productive and drive away some potential activists, but BLM has stuck to this stance.

1 On February 27, 2014, Obama launched the “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative, investing in and convincing private organizations to provide funding for civic organizations and mentorship programs designed to help African Americans reach their potential. The initiative was welcome, but overwhelmingly focused its communication campaigns on boys and men.

Dewey M. Clayton, in his 2018 literature review on BLM and the civil rights movement, considers these derived movements to be part of BLM on account of its decentralization. (Clayton, 459-460) It is also true BLM and SayHerName can hardly be said to share different ideals, and that the degree of intersectionality between their memberbases is likely high. Even if BLM did emerge primarily through the protesting of shootings of black males, the gravitational pull of its group identity (in other words, the fact these other groups are associated with BLM or with its slogan) seems to have offset this imbalance in representativity.

CHAPTER III: THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS EMERGENCE

3.1 The Presidency of Barack Obama and Black Lives Matter

From birth onwards, Obama's experience of blackness has been starkly different from that of many in black activist groups. Although he self-admittedly connects deeply with black culture through the memories of his father and the impact of basketball and music that shock-waved all the way from the mainland: black identity is far from being monolithic and Obama's stands out. The fact he was brought up by a white mother in Hawaii made him stick out compared to, say, a black man born and raised in Chicago, where the colorline was arguably much tougher. While he does identify as a black man, and while this contrast does not necessarily impact his understanding of racial issues in the country, it does make his experience less relatable among said groups. His different experience can be said to give him a different lens with which to take a look at systemic racism as he might share more with the white higher middle class or with the black elite given the universities he frequented (Chicago Law, Harvard Law). Personality-wise, Obama is also perceived as much less aggressive and pushy in his tactics and rhetoric than your run-of-the-mill activist. He built a reputation as a consensus-builder with a deeply rooted belief in education and wider policies.

The programs Obama favored would advance white America too-and without a specific commitment to equality, there is no guarantee that the programs would eschew discrimination. Obama's solution relies on a goodwill that his own personal history tells him exists in the larger country. My own history tells me something different. The large numbers of black men in jail, for instance, are not just the result of poor policy, but of not seeing those men as human. (Coates)

This ambiguous relationship with the black community, as well as his race-neutral stance Coates identifies as vital to his political survival, figuratively entrapped Obama between two extremities. This role as interlocutor went from being convincing enough to encourage black voters to massively go out and vote for him to eroding trust in Obama among these communities.

Before Ferguson, Obama's Philadelphia speech was as close as he had ever come to speaking truthfully about racism in the United States, even though he presented himself as an interested observer, a thoughtful interlocutor between African Americans and the nation as a whole, rather than a US senator with the political influence to effect the changes of which he spoke. Obama would continue in his role as "informed observer" even as president. We are led to believe that a man who can direct drone strikes in the mountains of Pakistan

and Afghanistan, who can mobilize resources to any corner of the world in the name of American foreign policy, is powerless to champion legislation and the enforcement of existing laws and rights in the interest of racial justice. (Taylor, 151)

As other politicians did at the time, Obama criticized BLM's lack of long-term planning and their alleged adversity to meeting with him to find a common ground.

You can't refuse to meet because that might compromise the purity of your position (...) The value of social movements and activism is to get you at the table, get you in the room, and then start trying to figure out how is this problem going to be solved. You then have a responsibility to prepare an agenda that is achievable-that can institutionalize the changes you seek-and to engage the other side. (Coates)

However, the meeting to which BLM was invited vastly differed to what was offered to the NAACP. BLM explained their refusal to go by their concern that the time window that was allocated to them was too short for a meaningful exchange, and were worried about being used for a "photo-shoot" by "the very body they were protesting". (Coates)

Depending on opinion and political affiliation, this can be seen two ways: either as an attempt to de-escalate tensions by making BLM seem to have "sold out", or as an attempt to make BLM a serious political player by giving it mainstream popularity first and to build on from there. Most of these criticisms seem to stem from BLM's refusal of the traditional top-down model, and to a larger extent with their concern for a lack of representativity. Obama did engage with larger, already deeply rooted activist groups such as the legendary NAACP in the summer of 2015, and did change his rhetoric drastically on this occasion. It is highly probable that, although this was not the direct result of BLM's involvement, the activist groundwork during the Baltimore and the Ferguson protests pressured a more acceptable response from the establishment. (Taylor, 27-28) Even though this focus on "purity" does make compromise much more difficult to reach, it is unlikely the radical positions of BLM would have been met. All in all, this pressure did bring race relations back onto the establishment's agenda: the December 2014 post-Ferguson meeting spoke volumes of the role street protests played.

Obama's record with LGBTQ rights was not as problematic for BLM, and even when activists asked the president, he would make clear any further progress on gender identity policies would have to come from the States, and would defend his federal legacy on the matter. (Liptak) While he did not fulfill every promise he made to the LGBTQ community during his campaigns, notably a federal law that would have protected LGBTQs against discrimination in jobs and housing based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, "the gay rights movement has seen more of its agenda successfully

enacted under Obama compared to other groups that made up his political base”. Although this may have had more to do with Republican leaders and CEOs siding with Obama on these issues (or at least not opposing him as fiercely) than with sheer willpower and strategy, it represented an historic shift. (Stewart-Winter, 109)

One of Obama’s most influential decisions when it came to reforming the justice system and enforcing civil rights laws was the appointment of Attorney General Eric Holder, who notably used the Department of Justice to legally combat voter identification laws and gerrymandering in Alabama, all of which negatively impacted the representativity of African Americans, but these legal actions were either unsuccessful or eventually overturned. Another crucial issue with the justice system Obama identified was over-incarceration and the unfairness of the drug laws in place resulting in a judicial racial bias. Mandatory minimums, “three-strikes” and long prison sentences for non-violent drug-related crimes were for him the remnants of inefficient policies, a perception shared by BLM. Although these measures were not as radical as BLM would have wanted them to be, Obama coined his “tough and smart” approach and managed to build consensus around shorter sentences for non-violent offenses, in a shift away from war-on-drugs era legislation focused on incarceration rather than treatment. His strategy consisted in passing watered-down acts such as the Fair Sentencing Act to chip away at judicial inequality regarding race without risking backlash by both reducing spending on prisoners¹ and not being too radical. When in 2013 the Obama administration was attacked on the grounds that the Fair Sentencing Act, an act implying that the laws it sought to change had furthered racial inequality, was not retroactive, his administration actually went as far as to argue that “Supreme Court precedent only barred legislative action based on deliberate racial animus, not just racially disparate impact, even if foreseeable”. On the other hand, Attorney General Eric Holder would deliver a speech in August 2013 on the “broken aspects” of the judicial systems and how it disparately harmed black and latino males, and sent memos to prosecutors effectively instructing them to disregard mandatory minimums under certain conditions. This was a display of how gridlocked the legislative branch was on judicial issues, even though it placed the blame on antiquated policies and not on law enforcement, prosecutors, judges or policymakers. (Lassiter, 169-171) Eric Holder was in effect the Obama administration's voice unhindered by the opposition in the legislative branch. Obama’s historic use of clemency during his mandate and especially on his last day in office to cancel or lower sentences that were overwhelmingly

1 Reducing “big spending” was a popular idea in the Tea Party, especially in the aftermath of the subprime crisis when spending cuts were a sure way of ensuring the Tea Party would not oppose an Act. This was used as a bargaining chip, a cornerstone of Obama’s strategy.

given at the height of the war-on-drugs is proof of a willingness to do more on the matter of fair sentencing, had it not been for his opposition. This was the most pardons and commutations given out both in a single presidency and in a single day by any president. (Korte)

Late in his presidency, the president even expressed himself in favor of the historically unpopular reparations to African Americans “even if it's not in the form of individual reparations checks but in the form of a Marshall Plan”. The concept of reparations, formulated during the reconstruction, is still touted nowadays by scholars such as Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers Smith as a viable option to repair still standing economic injustices. Again, this marks a drastic difference between Obama’s ideal political agenda and his revised, realistic policy plan.

The political problems with turning the argument for reparations into reality are manifold, Obama said. “If you look at countries like South Africa, where you had a black majority, there have been efforts to tax and help that black majority, but it hasn't come in the form of a formal reparations program. You have countries like India that have tried to help untouchables, with essentially affirmative-action programs, but it hasn't fundamentally changed the structure of their societies. So the bottom line is that it's hard to find a model in which you can practically administer and sustain political support for those kinds of efforts.” (Coates)

In an interview about BLM and his thoughts on the new movement once he was no longer in office, the former president described a lack of political bandwidth (the interest generated by a topic) on racially progressive measures among the majority and political capital (the wiggle room afforded by an accumulation of political resources) resulting in the lack of feasibility of passing such policies.

When I asked Obama about this perspective, he fluctuated between understanding where the activists were coming from and being hurt by such brushoffs. “I think that where I've gotten frustrated during the course of my presidency has never been because I was getting pushed too hard by activists to see the justness of a cause or the essence of an issue,” he said. “I think where I got frustrated at times was the belief that the president can do anything if he just decides he wants to do it. And that sort of lack of awareness on the part of an activist about the constraints of our political system and the constraints on this office, I think, sometimes would leave me to mutter under my breath.” (Coates)

Obama does recognize the use of holding the feet of the powerful to the fire, but felt the powerlessness of his position on these matters was misunderstood. By the time the Ferguson protests started, the president had lost part of his democratic support and faced tremendous opposition from a Republican

coalition between the GOP and the Tea Party. This difficult position was made evident by his recurrent resorting to executive power to pass legislation from his agenda.

3.2 The Role of the Opposition to Obama

By the time BLM formed, the opposition to Obama was well in place. As the euphoria of possible “postraciality” washed over the nation, the president and the democratic party realized soon enough that the political situation was changing, and the sobering reality of a strong opposition by a vivified GOP and a new Republican contender, the Tea Party, quickly settled in.

The GOP’s plan consisted mainly of the REDMAP (REDistricting MAjority Project): their objective had been to massively invest in State legislature races to ensure maximum control over redistricting (and allowing for future gerrymandering), to then use the resulting Republican lead to oppose the Democrats on domestic initiatives. (Zelizer, 17)

At the same time, the Tea Party gained momentum in the aftermath of the subprime crisis and its handling by the Obama administration, concerned by the bailout and reinvestment plan started by the Bush administration and continued by Obama’s. Originally a grassroots movement, it was joined by Washington insiders and parts of the Republican establishment, and tended to focus more on limiting benefits programs and preventing economic and environmental regulation, while caring much less about social issues such as abortion.¹ In spite of its grassroots origins, the Tea Party had become a force to be reckoned with: “The Speaker [John Boehner] concluded that the Tea Party Republicans had enough members to block any legislative priorities that they did not approve of.” (18) However the GOP and the Tea Party, despite ideological oppositions, were in agreement on one point: the President and the Democratic majority in Congress “had to be stopped in their tracks at all costs”. (16) Outside Washington, conservatives had achieved a massive foothold in the media. The conservative “echo chamber”, consisting of Fox News Network and sites such as Breitbart.com and the *Drudge Report*, could count on a dedicated base that was both more loyal and more sizable than its liberal counterparts. They were also responsible for helping propagate anti-Obama conspiracy theories and other smear campaigns, such as birtherism, a scandal based on the spurious claim Obama was not born in the United States but in Kenya, which would go on even after his birth certificate was posted online and confirmed to be legitimate by both FactCheck.org and PoliFact independently. (22-23)

1 Comparatively, abortion rights is a hot button issue for more traditional, “pro-life” Christian conservative Republicans.

This built on existing racial bias against Obama, but research also highlights a “rabbit hole” effect, a product of the constant repetition of misinformation affecting readers and listeners, proving the effectiveness of this “echo chamber” phenomenon. (Klinkner 2014)

Throughout Obama's first term, Tea Party activists voiced their complaints in racist terms. Activists brandished signs warning that Obama would implement “white slavery,” waved the Confederate flag, depicted Obama as a witch doctor, and issued calls for him to “go back to Kenya.” Tea Party supporters wrote “satirical” letters in the name of “We Colored People” and stoked the flames of birtherism. One of the Tea Party's most prominent sympathizers, the radio host Laura Ingraham, wrote a racist tract depicting Michelle Obama gorging herself on ribs, while Glenn Beck said the president was a “racist” with a “deep-seated hatred for white people.” The Tea Party's leading exponent, Andrew Breitbart, engineered the smearing of Shirley Sherrod, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's director of rural development for Georgia, publishing egregiously misleading videos that wrongly made her appear to be engaging in antiwhite racist invective, which led to her dismissal. (Coates)

These political dirty tricks, even if driven in essence by political motives and not racial ones, relied on and appealed to racial resentment. Smear campaigns mixed criticisms of Obama's policies with the hammering of African and otherwise unamerican themes. Mixing economic and social concerns, a plethora of witch-doctor themed anti-medicare posters circulated in Tea Party email listings. Doubts around the feasibility, expected drop in quality of medical services turned into a birther argument. (Gerstle, 273-275) Obama was in a position of “constant partisan defense” due to his conservative opponents maintaining “immense political power regardless of his approval ratings, popularity in the media, or reelection victory.” (Zelizer, 12)

Senate Republicans made it a virtual requirement for Senate Democrats to obtain a supermajority of sixty votes in the upper chamber (the number of votes needed to end a filibuster through closure) if they wanted anything to pass. As a result, many items did not receive discussion because it was clear there would never be sixty votes of support for legislation. Other measures died in the upper chamber despite majority support. (Zelizer, 14)

This Senate Democrats supermajority was unstable and was made possible by the caucusing of two independent Senators with the Democrats, with the amount of controlled votes only reaching this supermajority of 60 (assuming unanimous partisan opposition) during two periods: from July 7, 2009 to August 25, 2009 and from September 25, 2009 to February 4, 2010. In the House of Representatives, Democrats would lose their majority altogether on November 2, 2010.

The conservative opposition played a key role in creating a climate in which the less financially secure (therefore including minorities) lost out on benefits as the programs they were relying on were simply not adjusted for inflation, meaning a noticeable loss in buying power.

Policies such as the minimum wage diminished in value simply because Congress did nothing. By preventing Congress from updating programs to meet new economic conditions, Senate Republicans cut benefits. Obstructionism tended to hurt liberals more than the right. (Zelizer, 14)

Besides smear campaigns and legislative obstructionism, the opposition to Obama's policies also manifested itself in the judicial branch. Both indirect means have been employed, such as opposing nominations to judicial and administrative positions, effectively leading to the under-staffing of Federal courts and agencies (Zelizer, 14), and direct ones: US District Court Judge Roger Vinson in Florida preventing the application of Patient Protection and of the Affordable Care Act on the grounds of its possible unconstitutionality is a prime example. This resulted in Obama trying to push for compromising legislation that was both unsatisfactory for his Republican opposition and for his own party. A notorious example of the unsatisfactory quality of this consensus-building was the 2010 Fair Sentencing Act, a watered down version of the act which was originally, based on criticisms from both the public and the Sentencing Project advocacy group, supposed to do away with the difference in sentencing between possession of powder cocaine and possession of crack, a cheaper drug more prevalent among the black population, which resulted in lesser but still much tougher sentences for black drug users on average. The resulting act reduced this difference from 1-100 to 1-18, meaning it would take being stopped with 90 grams of powder cocaine to face the same sentence as a person stopped with 5 grams of crack with no pharmaceutical basis for this difference whatsoever, but a fierce opposition from Republicans and the (Republican-controlled) Senate Judiciary Committee. (Lassiter, 169-170)

On top of his Republican opposition, Obama faced an enemy, or rather enemies, from within. Already, on the campaign trail, the soon-to-be president had been pushed to repudiate his former pastor to safeguard the party's chances at a win. The tactic used by the Republicans was clear, and the Democrats' response also: Obama was not to be framed as a radical on race. The subject was not avoided entirely, and his "A More Perfect Union" speech actually turned out to be a sensational success in defusing a potentially destructive scandal. Still, the idea that Obama's presidency would need to remain as race-neutral as possible to ensure political survival was the best the Republican opposition could have hoped for, as it would alienate both radical and moderate supporters when came the

question of how Obama should deal with racial issues. Very early on in his presidency, the president learned that overt comments on racism would have to be carefully framed or delegated if he was to avoid backlash for inflammatory rhetoric. After the unlawful arrest of African American professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., the president decided to hold a press conference on July 22 2009 to address what was, to him, a potentially racially charged arrest. The words “police acted stupidly” made headlines (Associated Press), and added fuel to the fire that was the anti-Obama grassroots movement, on top of making his allies uncomfortable. This event also triggered another controversy, in which a National Guard officer used a racial slur to describe the victim of the incident in an email, which amplified this controversy. Moreover, the party suffered from a lack of discipline regarding their party line. The consequent dissent surprised the president on many occasions.

(...)he [Obama] struggled to win over even some of his own allies. Ben Nelson, the Democratic senator from Nebraska whom Obama helped elect, became an obstacle to health-care reform. Joe Lieberman, whom Obama saved from retribution at the hands of Senate Democrats after Lieberman campaigned for Obama's 2008 opponent, John McCain, similarly obstructed Obamacare. Among Republicans, senators who had seemed amenable to Obama's agenda-Chuck Grassley, Susan Collins, Richard Lugar, Olympia Snowe-rebuffed him repeatedly. (Coates)

The need to carefully pick his fights extended beyond public image and into a genuine concern for his party. Engaging political resources in an uphill battle against an opposition ready to threaten government shutdown and use filibusters to drag out the legislative process made going along with the president an increasingly risky bet for the party as a whole. Having become an implicit requirement for any meaningful legislation to pass, bipartisanship would limit the scope of what Obama would be able to achieve without resorting to executive action.

3.3 Global Inter-representation

BLM and their slogan have extended beyond the national scope. It is likely to have been the result of the massive sharing of pictures and videos of protests online in the English-speaking world and in traditional media abroad. Chapters have actually developed in Canada (Vancouver, Toronto, Waterloo) and were initially kick-started by protests in the name of Michael Brown. Darnell Moore, author and BLM activist, even reported conversing with Canadian protesters who had traveled all the way to Ferguson to join the local protests. (Taylor, 170) Although there is little doubt the BLM slogan

did not appear in these countries out of a total vacuum but rather provided existing activism on the ground with a farther reaching platform, it is undeniable that the worldwide appeal of its slogan hints at a resented under-representativity of racial minorities identifying with BLM outside the United States.

In the United Kingdom, BLM protests around July and August 2016 showed that despite a comparably minor amount of police-related deaths and a deeply different racial context. BLM struck a chord in the post-brexite referendum United Kingdom given the resentment of racial discrimination and institutional racism being expressed by black and brown populations of immigrant descent (Jamaican, Kenyan, Nigerian, Pakistani), although these issues extend to some extent to white immigrants given the existing tumultuous ethnic relations with people of Balkan, Irish, and Polish origins who are not represented by the slogan.

In the African continent, youth protests that have come before BLM have been compared in terms of their rejection of the top-down model and of their criticisms of the former, elderly leaders in their activism. (Strong, 267) Despite a vastly different cultural and political context, the African youth movements share a sense that the older generation failed them and that leadership is glutted with sit-tight leaders who do not represent this younger generation, including in “Tunisia (2011), Egypt (2011), Burkina Faso (2014), Democratic Republic of Congo (2015), and Burundi (2015)”. (267) Long considered as apolitical and undetermined for lacking a clear direction, these movements have now garnered the attention of many scholars. It is no coincidence they have become more numerous after 2012 with leaderless models comparable to BLM’s, as social media provide simpler organizational opportunities and the possibility of a large decentralized movement even with little resources. They allow young activists to develop online communities without the hindrance of traditional politics. Strong identifies this to be a major factor behind the 2012 OccupyNigeria movement, whose chosen model was comparable to BLM’s current one.

Shifting new media technology to the center of Nigeria’s political culture, these techno-social practices represent emerging arenas for young people to politically experiment and “renegotiate their place and space with patterns of authority and control.” (Iwilade, 2013, p. 1). This is because, unlike the other spheres of political life (e.g., political parties, state bureaucracy) where young Nigerians depend on the permission and resources of elders for access, within the media cultures related to new media technologies, young people occupy positions of authority and influence. (Strong, 270)

One of the most striking cases of inter-representation was BLM’s support for Palestinian sovereignty. To put things back into perspective, US foreign aid to Palestinians had never been higher

and would never again reach its 2014 peak with \$398,7 millions in contributions to UNRWA (Zanotti, 6). In any event, this meant taking a stance and challenging US foreign strategy choices in favor of Palestine in a move to show support for their Muslim members and Palestinian supporters. There does not seem to be any record of this actually impacting US foreign policy in any way.

The connecting of Black and Palestinian issues moved forward from early on in the Ferguson protests. The reaching out and showing up occurred through social media and physical presence. Activists in Palestine sent pictures of their demonstrations of support, some simply a picture of young people with a sign saying “FERGUSON WITH LOVE FROM PALESTINE.” They sent advice about coping with tear gas. Knowledge that some police deployed in Ferguson had received training in control of demonstrators from Israeli authorities brought points home. Above all, pro-Palestine forces in the United States mobilized impressively for the fall 2014 marches in Ferguson and St. Louis, joining locally based Palestinians. They came to demonstrate and also to address questions of day-to-day interactions between Arab and Islamic owners of stores and their African American customers. Within months African American activists from St. Louis and nationally were touring Palestine. Summer of 2015 saw solidarity flow from Black America, with dozens of organizations and over a thousand movement leaders signing a statement declaring for Palestinian freedom. (Roediger, 227)

BLM and M4BL in general worked on a global scale as a social and political megaphone of its own and was used by other groups and movements abroad sharing BLM’s core ideology for its relevance in the mainstream western cultural context and for its social media appeal, even when their specific demands varied from the group’s. Although this hasn’t been the case (or has not yet been proven at this point), this means BLM could hypothetically apply diplomatic pressure on the US via media depictions abroad¹ into changing their foreign strategy choices. This global inter-representation is the result of the extension of initially domestic issues with policing and racial inequality to other nations where these issues are resented. The BLM slogan is used as an international platform, whether the demands conveyed through this platform are the same or not.

1 Negatively impacting the international public opinion of the US abroad (threatening tourism and/or future bilateral opportunities) by putting on display racial inequalities in the US was one of the strategies employed by Soviet Russia in the cold war, a factor which contributed to the success of the civil rights movement (Klinkner and Rogers).

3.4 The Changing of Racial Attitudes

Ever since BLM started to seriously attract the attention of the public, a lot of politicians have been quite vocal about the group, their main criticism being the violence associated with BLM rallies¹ (despite not being endorsed or condoned by the group), their radical positions, and the lack of political feasibility of their program in the short term.

A Pew Institute study conducted from February 29 to May 8 2016 revealed that 40% of the white demographic supported BLM while 28% opposed it, and that 65% of the black demographic supported BLM whereas 12% opposed it. (Clayton, 476 table 2)

	Support %	Oppose %
All	43	22
White	40	28
Black	65	12
Other	33	11

2016 Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton notoriously went on record and recognized the group's cause as "fair", but was representative of the public opinion of the time by doubting the legal and political impact the movement would have if they didn't adopt a clearer political agenda. Again, political capital was brought up with the idea of "pitching" and "selling" the idea to the establishment and to the public. Clinton also framed the issue around political feasibility, an argument reminiscent of the criticisms of the "old guard".

Once there is a reckoning that racism is still a deep-seated issue in the nation, the next question by people who are on the sidelines, which is a vast majority of Americans, (...) is: "what do you want me to do about it?" (...) that's what I'm trying to put together in a way that I can explain it and I can sell it, because in politics if you can't explain it and you can't sell it, it stays on your shelf. (...) I don't believe you change hearts, I believe you change allocation of resources, you change the way systems operate, you're [BLM] not going to change every heart, you're not, but, at the end of the day, we can do a whole lot to change some hearts and change some systems and create more opportunities for people who deserve them (...). (Reilich, audio transcription)

1 It is also highly probable that the 2016 attack on police officers committed by a black veteran who self-admittedly acted on his own during a BLM rally in Dallas, which killed 5 officers, wounded 2 and wounded 2 civilians (NBC 5 Staff), significantly affected BLM's reputation. BLM unambiguously condemned the attack but faced severe backlash online and in the media for having allegedly ignited racial tensions.

Despite its minor direct political influence, BLM has managed to impact racial perceptions, and to bring back racial issues into mainstream debates while showing the nation the senselessness of the colorblindness argument. It is now unlikely for a mainstream news article such as Forbes's 2008 "Racism is over" to retort to the question of whether racism remains a serious problem in America that Obama's election "proved, as nothing else could have, that it no longer does." (McWorther) Such protests could not have been solely the result of some "professional hotheads" (McWorther) stirring up trouble, and to a certain extent it provided part of the English-speaking western world with an opportunity to tackle race relations issues. Clinton's concern is a practical one: an absence of legal frameworks and policies indubitably provides less guarantees than relying on opinion shifts in society at large and goodwill. However, BLM gave race relations problems and the injustices the black minority faces more visibility, likely triggering such a shift. Another practical concern would be that without changing racial attitudes, it would be impossible to "explain" and "sell" the necessary policies. Championing change becomes a much easier task for politicians when public opinion shifts to a favorable stance. It would also be a mistake to underestimate the impact of the steady decrease in implicit racial biases the nation has undergone (increasing the amount of white-black contact, decreasing the amount of discrimination in hiring, housing, grading and lending (Sawyer and Gampa, 1040)), as even carefully crafted legislation can do little to affect one's thought process and personal experiences. To the question "could social movements (and the cultural and media changes they produce) potentially contribute to such reductions in implicit bias", and more specifically BLM, the answer seems to be overwhelmingly positive. Results, by nature, can of course only be correlational, since societal-level changes are affected by an immeasurable amount of factors, but monitoring change over the Obama era (January 1, 2009-June 30, 2016) and closely monitoring change starting after the Zimmerman trial (July 6, 2013-June 30, 2016) increases the likelihood of these changes being attributable to the movement for Black Lives. (1042)

With his race neutral policies, his deep belief in the American dream and his culturally perfect family, Obama's election and presidency did mark an uptick in racial attitudes towards African Americans in some lab experiments, but these changes have not been deemed particularly meaningful when accounting for sample demographics. These underwhelming results further stress the importance of BLM's role in changing racial attitudes during the Obama era. BLM's positive impact on racial attitudes can hypothetically be attributed to its providing more opportunities for discussions on race whether in traditional or in less mainstream media, and even in casual settings.

This is potentially significant because listening to opinions expressed through speech seems to increase the likelihood that individuals will attribute humanlike qualities to those expressing the opinion—even if the opinion is not currently shared (Schroeder, Kardas, & Epley, 2017). Furthermore, the millions of individuals who attend BLM demonstrations or who come to politically identify with the movement may create new associations between themselves and Blacks; such associations with the self are argued to produce more positive evaluations of the attitude object (Walther & Trasselli, 2003). Furthermore, through participation in or identification with BLM there is the possibility of creating a common ingroup identity (e.g., as antiracists) that includes both Blacks and Whites, which evidence suggests can reduce racial bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). (Sawyer and Gampa, 1041)

The study also raises the point of attitudinal “backlash”, especially in the presence of groups (All Lives Matter) and communities (Blue Lives Matter) building their identities directly against BLM’s perceived group identity. It concluded implicit pro-white bias was slightly rising pre-BLM and that this trend was reversed, meaning this implicit bias decreased slightly during the designated BLM period, and that explicit pro-white bias was decreasing slightly already, but that this decrease became steeper after July 7 2013. Unexpectedly, and to the researchers’ surprise, black participants did not show a pro-black shift, as their average opinion shifted to a lesser pro-black implicit and explicit bias during the designated BLM period. The results show an unequivocal shift towards a more egalitarian opinion across the board, although this shift remains minor. The authors also highlight the fact these phenomenons were more intense during major BLM-related events. (1045; 1055) Although limited, these changes are not meaningless: they represent steady shifts towards an absence of racial bias. Even though it is indubitably too early to assess the significance of the movement for Black Lives’ influence on the reactions to the recent events in Minneapolis, a sign that “hearts” are indeed changing is the difference in the reactions to the killing of George Floyd and the reactions after the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, the 2014 killing of Eric Garner, or the 2014 Michael Brown shooting, to only cite a few. The fact even pro-police figures such as co-founder of Humanize The Badge Mike Edwards (also known as “Mike the Cop”), and founder of Breaking Barriers United Ryan Tillman condemned the police officers involved unambiguously and supported non-violent protesters with the title “He Matters”, as opponents to Black Lives Matter in the past, shows early signs of a possible shift in opinion in favor of BLM and their cause. Despite still mentioning “an isolated incident”, their discourse has gone from using this expression to deflect accusations (based on the justification that “real” police officers are accountable to their actions), to embracing the idea that accountability is shared and that police all over the nation share part of the responsibility for this act. (“Mike the Cop”, 2020)

CONCLUSION

The policing crisis along with deep-seated judicial and economic racial inequalities in America resulted in an explosive situation brimming with animosity between the black minority and the police, while this minority was simultaneously suffering from a colorblind benign neglect during a conservative political shift. Whether Obama and his administration could have had more impact on policing and justice reform in the face of strong opposition or not, part of the black minority felt insufficiently represented and new forms of both street and online activism around these issues started to gain momentum, starting around 2011 during the Occupy movement. In the aftermath of the 2008 subprime crisis, the sudden loss in sales tax revenue pushed the city of Ferguson to make up for its municipal budget imbalance with fines and fees. The increased pressure on their overstretched court system and on their police department, whose methods have been found to have little impact on public safety, to discriminate, and to violate the constitution on a regular basis, heavily factored into the killing of Michael Brown. While this was not the first police killing of its kind, the Ferguson events were a clear microcosm of the institutional racism plaguing the African American communities of many other cities. The message of Black Lives Matter, in essence, was (and is still) the following: the fault lied not only in the officer responsible, but also in the surrounding system which required of this department's officers to perpetuate a set of guidelines, some of which discriminatory, draconian or even made illegal by the very laws enforced, under the false pretense to legitimacy of public safety. Criticized for the vagueness of their demands, BLM has integrated ideas from local communities, government recommendations and think tanks, they have gradually come up with hypothetical solutions to the policing crisis (Campaign Zero), and wider societal reform ideas in an association with other activist groups (M4BL) to radically change American society around measures ensuring racial equality. Arguably, while policing reform has gained political bandwidth in recent years, these larger measures are still vastly considered radical and politically infeasible at this time.

Its decentralized, sustainable, and more women and LGBTQ inclusive model allowed its members to be on the ground where and when it mattered most, and attracted a younger base mostly disinterested or disillusioned with traditional, top-down organizations. Their slogan resonated domestically and even abroad as an easy way of bringing social media attention to contextually relevant racial issues, even though said issues might differ from those prevalent in the United States.

In light of the recent events surrounding the death of George Floyd, protesters nationwide (and in other nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, France, South Africa and more) have echoed the BLM slogan. Many who were on the fence about the still-hatching Black Lives movement during the Ferguson events, including some pro-police activism figures such as Mike “the Cop” Edwards (Humanize the Badge) or Ryan Tillman (Breaking Barriers United), have come around to condemning the shooting and supporting BLM in pushing for more regulation around use of force and officer accountability, despite not agreeing with all of their demands (their main disagreements being whether funds should be diverted away from the police and toward more social services, and at what point can an officer consider their life to be threatened). Even the historic civil rights association NAACP has partnered with BLM and used their slogan in crowdfunding campaigns. Although it is still too early to make conclusive assertions, the frictions between the group and more mainstream organizations that had plagued the marches for Ferguson in December 2014 have visibly subsided. In time, the Department of Justice Civil Rights investigation into the Minneapolis Police Department called by Minnesota Governor Tim Walz should provide more specific answers about the context surrounding the incident and the larger systemic problems in the department that could have factored in yet another unjust police killing.

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