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African Americans' Response to Police Brutality: The Black Lives Matter Strategy and Agenda

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my siblings, Karim, Yacine and Doudi. To my grandparents, my uncle and my auntie who have always been a constant source of encouragement and support during the challenges of my whole college life. To my bestie Malak Rahmouni whom I am truly grateful for having in my life. This work is also dedicated to my mother. Mom, thank you for the unconditional love that you provide me with, thank you for every single sacrifice. I dedicate this work to my teachers and my friends.

Thank you everyone

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Abstract

With highly profiled incidents of police shootings of unarmed African Americans which the American criminal justice system deemed justifiable, came the response Black Lives Matter. The rise of this movement coincided with the second Obama presidency in 2014. This indicates that nuclear social injustices related to race are still existent in the American society. The Black Lives Matter is a social justice movement that protests police brutality of African American citizens. The present thesis aims at analyzing the efficiency of the movement's strategies in reinforcing its agenda against the rampant police killings of black Americans. In particular, this thesis deals with three selected strategies: the use of social media, the horizontal approach of leadership, and the fusion of LGBTQ and anti-brutality activism. The present research relies on a critical data analysis of primary and secondary sources. Social media platforms are instrumental to the Black Lives Matter Movement in spreading its message. The horizontal approach to leadership provides equal space to the movement's activists in decision making and developing effective action plans. The fusion of LGBTQ and ant-brutality makes the movement inclusive to all factions exposed to police violence. Based on these results, it is concluded that these strategies have been effective in reinforcing the movement's agenda against police brutality.

Key Words: African Americans, anti-brutality activism, Black Lives Matter Movement, horizontal approach to leadership, police brutality.

ملخص

مع حوادث إطلاق النار البارزة التي ارتكبتها رجال الشرطة في حق أمريكيين من أصول أفريقية عزل و التي اعتبرها نظام العدالة الجنائية الأمريكي مبررة، جاءت استجابة "حياة السود مهمة". حركة "حياة السود مهمة" هي حركة عدالة اجتماعية تحتج على و حشية الشرطة التي تستهدف الأمريكيين الأفارقة. تهدف هذه الأطروحة إلى تحليل كفاءة استراتيجيات هذه الحركة في تعزيز أجندتها ضد عمليات القتل التي يرتكبها رجال الشرطة في المجتمع الأمريكي الأسود. على وجه الخصوص، تهتم الأطروحة باستخدام وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، المنهج الأفقي للقيادة و دمج النشاط المثلي مع النشاط المناهض للوحشية. تعتمد هذه الرسالة على تحليل بيانات مأخوذة من مصادر أولية و ثانوية. إن منصات التواصل الاجتماعي لها دور مهم في مساعدة حركة "حياة السود مهمة" على نشر قضيتها. يوفر المنهج الأفقي للقيادة مساحة متساوية لنشطاء الحركة لاتخاذ القرارات ووضع خطط العمل. دمج النشاط المثلي و النشاط المناهض للوحشية يجعل الحركة شاملة لجميع الشرائح المعرضة للعنف على أيدي الشرطة. بناء على هذه النتائج، تم التوصل إلى أن هذه الاستراتيجيات فعالة في تعزيز أجندة حركة "حياة السود مهمة" ضد وحشية الشرطة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأمريكيين الأفارقة، حياة السود مهمة، منهج القيادة الأفقي، النشاط المثلي، النشاط المناهض للوحشية و وحشية الشرطة.

List of Acronyms

BLM	Black Lives Matter
BPP	Black Panther Party
CHP	California Highway Patrol
COINTELPRO	Counter Intelligence Program
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
LGBTQ	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer
USA	The United States of America

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GENERAL
INTRODUCTION

The foundation of the American nation is placed upon the principles of democracy, freedom and liberty. Yet, African Americans' history which is deeply rooted in the history of the nation reveals a reality that contradicts its founding principles. Over centuries, African Americans were intimidated and subjected to numerous inhumane practices by the whites. From slavery, black codes and institutional segregation to lynching and police brutality.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, and more precisely since the 1940s, police brutality has been a major civil rights issue, one that has urged urban African American communities to march and to protest against it. As a response, governmental attempts to curb police brutality has included the ethnic diversification of police departments, sensitive training of officers, community policing, and assigning black officers to black neighborhoods. As the issue continues to persist in the twenty first century, these attempts have served only as alleviators to the tensions between police forces and African Americans and not as definite solutions.

The summer of 2013 was a time of unrest for Black Americans. The United States criminal justice system failed to indict George Zimmerman, a neighborhood vigilante who shot the black unarmed seventeen years old Trayvon Martin. The verdict along with further similar instances was a confirmation that Black lives do not matter. As a consequence to that tragic event, a new generation of grassroots anti-brutality activists was born. Those activists have clustered around a new peculiar movement called the Black Lives Matter Movement. They have been galvanizing and protesting against these rampant shootings.

The Black Lives Matter Movement is a social justice movement that was founded by three female radical black organizers. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi united their efforts and transformed their outrage over police shootings of unarmed black civilians into action by starting a social media campaign that challenges state sanctioned violence. Eventually, the movement took to the streets to protest police killings on the ground.

Over the course of time, historians, academics, and researchers directed the lion's share of attention towards the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. As a result, the issue of police brutality and anti-brutality activism were not given a thorough coverage by historians. To that end, the main rationale for the present research is to highlight an overlooked phase in the African American quest for liberation as related to the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Contemporary America is a post-racial and a color blind society. That was clearly demonstrated in the election of Mr. Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States of America. However, the ironical emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement during the tenure of Mr. Obama indicates that, despite gaining political power, Black American activists are still urged to carry out their ancestors' legacy of liberation to confront the disproportionate police violence to which their communities are still subjected. Given the failing governmental attempts at containing Police violence targeting Black Americans and the massive backlash against The Black Lives Matter Movement, the present research investigates to the following questions:

- To what extent do the strategies of the Black Lives Matter Movement reinforce its agenda against police brutality?

The present research aims also at investigating the following sub-questions:

- What historical developments constructed the tensions between African Americans and law enforcement?
- What factors stimulated the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement?
- What were the reactions of the American society towards the Black Lives Matter Movement?

Since The Black Lives Matter Movement originated, primarily, as a response to police brutality that has been targeting African Americans for decades, the present research aims at providing the main historical and social factors that shaped the tensions between African Americans and police forces.

The present research provides an overview on African American anti-brutality activism through the post World War II period. With regards to those previous historical events, the present research examines the strategies that the Black Lives Matter Movement's activists have adopted. In particular, the research analyzes the movement's horizontal approach to leadership, its use of social media, and its fusion of anti-brutality activism with other minority group activism such as LGBTQ activism. From the analysis, the research achieves its aim on exploring the efficiency of these selected strategies in reinforcing the movement's agenda against the issue of police brutality which still targets African Americans in twenty first century America.

Regarding methodology, the present research relies on a variety of primary and secondary sources. Mainly, the primary sources are in the form of official statements taken from the Black Lives Matter movement official website. In addition to that, the research exploits a number of interviews with the movement's founders. The secondary sources, on the other hand, are in the form of books and articles written by different scholars on the subject matter of the research. Through this combination of sources, the present research incorporates a critical data analysis method that goes from general to specific. Through an analysis of the historical roots of police brutality of African Americans, the present research provides a thorough understanding of the factors that have led to the inception of movements like the Black Lives Matter to emerge. The present research follows the eighth edition of the MLA manual of style, and it uses footnotes to clarify a number of terms.

The present research paper is divided into three chapters. The two first chapters constitute a historical and theoretical framework that tackles important concepts and approaches related to the question. The third chapter is solely devoted to the analysis of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and its strategies.

The first chapter is entitled **African Americans and Law Enforcement: a Historical Background**. This chapter provides a historical overview on the development of the relationship between the urban African American communities and police. This chapter also presents a number of police brutality incidents and highlights the outcomes of the tensions that characterized the relationship of black Americans with law enforcement.

The second chapter is entitled **The Genesis of the Black Lives Matter Movement**. It is concerned with providing the factors that led to the movement's rise and how did the movement transform from a social media campaign into the streets. Also, it provides the main events in which the Black Lives Matter Movement was involved and how did the American public react to the movement.

The third chapter **The BLM Framework: Selected Strategies to Reinforce the Movement's Agenda** aims at analyzing three selected strategies that the movement's founders have adopted. In particular, this chapter analyzes the movement's horizontal approach to leadership, its use of social media platforms as a mobilizing tool, and the movement's fusion of anti-brutality activism with the LGBTQ activism. The main aim of the analysis is to explore how these strategies serve the movement to promote its agenda against police brutality and how do they effectively meet the appeals of the African American community concerning police violence.

Chapter One

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction

As their existence in the United States dates back to the Colonial Era, the history of African Americans is an integral part of the nation's history. The starting point of their journey was the institution of slavery. For decades, slavery had determined their role and position in society. Following their emancipation, after the end of the Civil War (1865), the black slaves entered a stigmatic phase of struggle for survival in a white supremacist society. Along with the numerous social inequalities that blacks faced in America, the life costing violence that they endured was a major source of frustration and agony. As a means of intimidation, white supremacist criminalized blacks and lynched them. African Americans who fled the horrors encountered in the south into the North came into contact with the police who, in their turn, brutalized and harassed them. Consequently, the tensions between the African American community and the police forces culminated and shaped a significant number of events. This chapter aims at providing the main developments that characterized the relationship between the members of the African American community and law enforcement and how their tumultuous relationship was a catalyst in a number of major American events.

1.2. The Social and Historical Roots of the Violence against Blacks in America

The architecture of American democracy was inspired from the ideals put forth by the Enlightenment philosophers. Therefore, human life, individual liberties, justice and the equal protection before the law became constitutionally protected. However, Gunnar Myrdal observes that "To be sure, the political creed of America is not very

satisfactorily effectuated in actual social life” (3). In respect to black people, Myrdal’s observation highlights the contradiction of ideals and social reality.

In the remote history of the American society, police violence targeting black people is a deeply ingrained phenomenon. Katheryn K. Russel states that black people’s mistrust in the justice system resulted from the enforcement of slave and black codes¹ by the police and their participation in maintaining segregation and taking part in the extremist practice of lynching² (35). The latter statement is indication that the tensions between African Americans and police are shaped by the social circumstances.

As slavery was a legal institution regulated by law, police officers were given the prerogative to enforce slave codes. Myrdal states, “They were given the widest license to seize, whip and punish Negroes and generally to act as the agents of the masters” (532). The enforcement of slave codes resulted in physical violence against the black slaves from the part of police because the slaves were the property of their masters and it was the duty of police to protect these properties.

The end of the Civil War in 1865 resulted in the manumission of the black slaves and adoption of the reconstruction amendments. White supremacists were stroke in their dignity, as their former slaves became constitutionally their equal parts. As a result, they reflected their outrage through developing new methods of intimidation and

¹ Black Codes were laws designed to restrict the freedom of African Americans after the abolition of slavery. These laws ensured that African Americans remain available as a cheap labor force (History, par 4).

² According to Vocabulary.com, lynching is an unlawful homicide committed by a mob. It was used by dominant groups to control minorities. Lynchings were practiced in the American South against African Americans.

violence against the newly freed slaves. Conducted by the Ku Klux Klan, lynching of blacks was the prominent white supremacist activity of the era.

The core justification that white supremacists used to conduct a lynching was the criminalization of blacks. For instance, an alleged rape of a white woman by a black man could serve as a catalyst for a lynching. Russel states, “white mobs which, sometimes included police officers, gathered to take part in the hanging, burning or shooting” (21). Instead of preventing these extralegal acts of white vigilantism, police officers acted reluctantly and, sometimes, took part in the lynching rituals.

As a result of the activities conducted by the lynch mobs, hundreds of black Americans lost their lives. Michel J. Klarman estimates that between the years 1895 and 1900 almost 101 blacks were lynched a year, mostly in the south (3). Therefore, it becomes evident that the violence targeting African Americans, whether by members of the white society or by the law enforcement officials, is historically and socially constructed.

1.3. The development of the African American Urban Neighborhoods

In the process of the Great Migration, African Americans fled the horrors they encountered in the South by moving to cities, in search for better economic and social opportunities. By the end of the Second World War, the African American community grew in number and most of which resided in cities. The urban setting was a legible environment for a new source of frustration for black Americans.

Although the North was more racially progressive than the South, African Americans still faced racism there. They were segregated in ghettos and the urban life

introduced a significant number of challenges. As whites moved to the suburbs, cities became majorly populated by blacks which increased the chances of their exposure to police officers. Moore argues that the growth of the African American community in the nation's cities resulted in white officers developing an "us versus them" mentality, as they encountered African Americans on a daily basis (1). As an attempt to control blacks' activity, the African American neighborhoods became characterized by an intensified presence of police officers. Therefore, every encounter with an African American had the potential of turning into an act police harassment or brutality.

According to Moore, the term police brutality, which became all-encompassing of African Americans, during the postwar period, refers to the excessive use of force by police officers, police killings of civilians, the use of abusive and racist language, and the sexual assault of women (1). Historically, African Americans had been subjected to such treatments by police officers.

In March 1955, fourteen African American children entered an abandoned only-white playground called McDonough, in Algiers, New Orleans. Police officers violently arrested the fourteen children and took them to jail, where they had to wait for their parents for more than two hours. Those who witnessed the arrest reported that the children were called by racist names and that police behavior was "Gestapo like" (Moore 37). The latter incident outraged more than 450 parents who galvanized at the Masonic Temple to write and sign a petition which demanded the access of African Americans to the playgrounds without being afraid of police. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People of New Orleans threatened that a legal action would be taken if city officials ignore the demands of the petition (Moore 37). The fact

that the fourteen children were juvenile did not prevent the police officers from committing such an act of brutality. African American women, also, had their share of police brutality.

In November 1955, twenty three years old female African American motorist was pulled over and raped by three white police officers, in New Orleans. After the incident and in a quest for justice, the woman decided to take her case to the courts. The three officers were arrested and charged with rape, after being identified by the victim. However, the three officers were cleared of all charges by an all-white jury, In March 1960. (Moore 39-40). The verdict highlighted the unfortunate fact that African Americans had no legal recourse to combat police abuse because the white supremacist ideology extended to the criminal justice system.

In another incident of police brutality, an African American named George Wright was shot to death by a New Orleans police Department officer in 1955. According to those who witnessed the event, Wright was aggressively beaten and called a “black nigger” by the police officer and, then, he was asked to run. While attempting to run, the boy was fatally shot in his back. To justify his deed, the police officer claimed that Wright was holding a knife and that he had shot in self-defense. Although the witnesses had testified, the police department paid no efforts in investigating the shooting (Moore 38-39). The latter incident reflects how the indifference of police departments in holding their officers accountable for the use of excessive force reinforces officers’ sense of impunity, when it comes to fatally shooting African Americans.

While lynching had been exclusive to the Southern rural setting, police brutality came to replace it in the urban setting. Every police encounter had the potential of turning into an act of fatal violence, where an African American would be the victim. “Police brutality replaced lynching as a means of oppressing blacks” (Moore “Police Brutality” par.9). The fact that the lives of blacks are always a part of the equation induced the outrage of the African American community. They would respond and take measures, in an attempt to address this issue.

The rise of African American anti-brutality activism was stimulated by the repeated incidents of police harassment. As police brutality mostly affects the low-income and working class portions of the African American community, Moore states, the fight against brutality would be led at the grassroots level (3). The black community’s major demands were holding police officers accountable for their actions, that black folks receive an equal treatment at the hands of police, and federal intervention in investigating police misconduct, and establishing Civilian Review boards.

As a response to police brutality and misconduct, civilian review boards were created in the late 1940s. According to Solomon, vice president of Race and Ethnicity Policy at American Progress, civilian review boards are a reflection of the democratic process which allows citizens and non-sworn officers to investigate complaints of misconduct against law enforcement officers and enables the public to review the performance of law enforcement departments (par.4). Although civilian review boards and a number of other governmental reforms were aimed at being instrumental in

curbing police misconduct, their efficiency proved to be smaller than the overall size of the issue.

1.4. The Watts Riots of 1965

Similar to the predominantly black neighborhoods in the urban cities, the Watts neighborhoods, Los Angeles, was a refuge to those African Americans who fled racism and discrimination. The residents of the Watts neighborhood faced the harsh realities that most of their fellow African Americans faced. They were poor, segregated, isolated and were exposed to an intense police presence in the neighborhood which made racial profiling a fact of life.

On August, 11, 1965, an African American resident of the Watts named Marquette Frye was pulled over by a Los Angeles patrol officer, after being suspected of driving intoxicated. The scene took place near the neighborhood. The young motorist's resistance of the arrest attracted a crowd of residents which resulted in the patrol officer calling Back-up. When the Los Angeles police units arrived to the scene, an altercation erupted with the Watts citizens, marking the beginning of the Watts Riots of 1965. As a consequence of the riots, buildings were burned and goods were looted from the stores. The Watts riots lasted for six days and resulted in the death of thirty four people, the injury of thousand others and the loss of forty million dollars worth property (Edy par.1). The uncontrollable events initiated a number of heated debates and controversy, among the politicians and social commentators.

Observing the media's depictions of the rioters burning building and looting the stores, those on the right wing claimed that the riot is only a reflection of African

Americans' tendency to criminality. Others, however, viewed the events as being induced by street gangs. The final interpretation was that these riots are only the juice of the long history of tensions and economic inequality (Edy par.3). The Watts riot remains one of the notable civil unrests that the American history encountered; it debunked the size of an issue that has been accumulating for years.

1.5. The Detroit Riots of 1967

The African American neighborhoods of Detroit, alike to those in other cities, were a site of social inequalities and racial strife. The black residents of Detroit viewed the police officers as an "occupying army" and accused them of racial profiling, harassment and excessive use of force which led to the death of several African Americans (Emerka par.1). The longstanding institutional racism and the unfair treatment blacks received fueled African American's outrage and caused the Detroit Riot of 1967.

On July, 23, 1967, the Michigan police vice squad raided an illegal drinking club, on the 12th Street, Detroit. At that night, the club which the police raided was hosting a welcome party to two Vietnam War veterans who had recently went back home. The police arrested eighty-five attending patrons, eighty-two of whom were African American. The residents who witnessed the arrest were outraged and started altercating with the police.

African Americans started the protests which became uncontrollable and turned into a civil unrest. The riots lasted for five days resulted in the death of forty three people, numerous others were injured and more the seven thousand were arrested, and

thousand buildings were burned (Emerka par.2). Following the Detroit Riot, President Lyndon Johnson formed a National Advisory Commission on civil disorder, known as the Kenner Commission, to investigate the underlying causes of such riots. The commission reached the conclusion that the stimulating factors of such riots are, again, racism, discrimination and poverty (Emerka par.2).

Black Americans had been culminating rage, over the years. The inhumane treatments to which they had been exposed fueled their reactions that their white counterparts perceived as crime. The Detroit Riot of 1976 portrayed the size of the racial strife in America. As African American activists were aware of the magnitude of this issue their anti-brutality struggle continued.

1.6. Anti-brutality Activism: The Black Panther Party and Policing the Police

Although the issue of police brutality cuts across social class lines, the social strata had divided the African American anti-brutality fight. Unlike the lower classes, the African American middle class seldom voiced this issue. The established civil rights organizations such as: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League were often reluctant in protesting police violence (Moore “Police Brutality” par.11). However, this has not been an obstacle in creating grassroots organizations that would challenge police brutality.

As a result of years of police oppression towards African Americans, the Black Panther Party (BPP) was founded in Oakland, California in 1966. The Panthers, who were strong advocates of the armed self-defense, established neighborhood patrols to monitor police activity because their main aim was to protect the black community from

the racially abusive policing (Moore 70). Although the BPP adopted a militant fashion of self-defense in its fight for freedom, the party aimed at providing support and improving the condition of the African American community.

When founding the BPP, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the co-founders of the party, made combating the epidemic of police brutality their primary goal. Carrying their rifles, they patrolled the streets and monitored police activity. Consequently, the California Assembly responded by proposing a law that prohibits the overt holding of firearms (Russonello par.1). To protest the bill, a small number of the BBP's members marched to the California legislature. The Panthers considered the legislation as a governmental attempt to paralyze the party's efforts in combating police brutality (Duncan par.3). The protest attracted media coverage and helped the party in spreading its influence and establishing various chapters across the country.

The BPP's Ten Point Program illustrated the founders' awareness of the problems and challenges facing the black community. The main demands included in the points, besides ending police brutality, were improving the living conditions of the African community through providing them with better education, health care programs, and better housing. The Free Breakfast Program that the BBP established across its chapters to feed school children remains its long lasting legacy. Collier states, "The breakfast program gave the Panthers an anchor to talk about something that seldom made the headlines in America, hunger and poverty" (par.3).

With every BPP chapter, the Free Breakfast Program spread across the United States providing a breakfast meal to more than one thousand children per week.

According to Flores Forbes, a member in the BPP, the Breakfast Program helped the black children to “grow and intellectually develop because children can’t learn on empty stomachs” (qtd.in Poster par.3). Forbes’s statement reflects the extent to which the party’s efforts are dedicated to address a larger range of issues in the black community. Collier notes that BPP’s efforts came in a critical period in the American history that was marked by a shift from the peaceful protests into the long and hot summers of riots in the black communities (par.3). The activities of the party attracted the attention of the FBI who considered the Panthers a threat to national security and their programs a tool of subversion.

1.7. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Agenda against the Black Panther Party

As the Black Panther Party grew in influence, it did not take long until the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) made the party and its members a target of its Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). In an effort to dismantle the Communist Party, the FBI established the COINTELPRO, in 1956. Through this program, the FBI used covert and illegal tactics to disrupt groups that it perceived as a threat to national security. During the 1960s, it targeted domestic groups including the Black Panther Party and the Socialist Worker Party (Judge par.3). Led by J.Edgar Hoover, the FBI’s COINTELPRO aimed at pulverizing the BPP from within by using a false propaganda to scorn the efforts of the party and to depict its members in a negative light. A former member of the Black Panther Party, Melvin Dickson, stated that the FBI targeted the Panthers because they exposed the American government’s failure in combating poverty (Poster par.6). Ironically, the members of BPP who sought an end to police brutality would become victims of this issue.

On April 6, 1968, two days following Martin Luther King's assassination, the Panthers and the Oakland police clashed in a shootout that lasted 90 minutes. Eventually, two police officers were injured and Bobby Hutton, a prominent BPP member, was shot to death. According to the police's account of event, Hutton left the party's headquarter carrying a rifle when he was shot while attempting to escape. On the hand, Eldridge Cleaver, another BPP member who was involved in the shootout, claimed that Hutton had his hands up in the air until his last breath (Niekerken par.5).

On December 4, 1969, the Chicago Police, in conjunction with the FBI, raided the Chicago Black Panther headquarters. Fred Hampton, who was the deputy chairman of the national BPP and the chairman of the Illinois chapter, was shot to death by the Chicago police while sleeping next to his pregnant fiancée. Deborah Johnson, Hampton's fiancée, recalls the police saying "He's good and dead now" (qtd.in Aron par.12). Hampton's murder at the hands of the Chicago Police was as harsh as Noam Chomsky labeled it the "gravest crime in the Nixon administration" (qtd.in Long par.1). The Chicago Police reported that, as soon as they announced themselves, the Panthers opened fire. However, a federal grand jury later proved that the police fired 83 to 90 shots, while the Panthers shot only once. It had been also revealed that this attack was a part of the COINTELPRO program (Judge par.6).

In a period characterized with major civil unrests in the black communities, the foundation of the Black Panther Party stood in a critical period in the American history. As a grassroots organization, its founders criticized the inequities that African Americans faced in America and dedicated their efforts to provide help. Armed with their rifles, the Panthers patrolled the black neighborhoods to protect their fellows from

the harassment of the police. Their Free Breakfast Program provided poor children with breakfast meals. The bold tactics adopted by the Panthers and their critique to capitalism resulted in the BPP's categorization as a "hate group" by the FBI. The FBI, headed by Edgar J. Hoover, targeted the Panthers through the COINTELPRO program that aimed at spreading friction inside the organization, promoting a false propaganda that deformed the image of the Panthers in the public eye, and sometimes violently attacking the members of the BBP. Judge estimates that, "Between 1968 to 1971, more than 20 Panthers were killed by police and more than 1.000 were jailed" (par.8). By the 1980s, the FBI had succeeded in destroying the BBP and its programs. However, the legacy of the Panthers remains alive as their Free Breakfast Program inspired the establishment of the School Breakfast Program by the federal government. The Panthers could not live up to their ideals, yet their impact was significant in the Black Power era. They would later be an inspiration to other generations of grassroots liberation fighters.

1.8. The Rodney King Beating Ignites the Los Angeles Riots of 1992

The beating of Rodney King by four Los Angeles police officers is an incident that shaped one of the major historical events of the United States. The acquittal of the officers involved in the beating both raised the claims that the criminal justice system is racially biased and ignited the civil unrest of 1992 (Carroll par.1). This event raised a number of heated debates concerning the criminal justice system's contribution in reinforcing the impunity of police, when brutalizing an African American.

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King was driving his car on the Foothill Freeway of Los Angeles. The California Highway Patrol (CHP) engaged in a high-speed pursuit, as

an attempt to stop King who was driving over the speed limits. After stopping him, CHP police officers arrested King and the two passengers that were in the car with him. Being on a parole for armed robbery, made King resist arrest because he was driving intoxicated which violated his parole. In an attempt to subdue him, four police officers began beating King with their nightsticks. The incident was videotaped by George Holliday whose apartment was near the place where the beating took place. The video was aired on television and was used in courts, during the trial of the officers.

As a result of the beating, King suffered from a number of injuries including a fractured facial bone and several bruises that kept him hospitalized for two days. King was released without any charges and commented on the incident by stating that his fear for his life urged him to remain calm and take the beating “like a man” (Coakly par.5). Officers Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, Theodore Briseno, and Stacey Koon were all indicted of the use of excessive force and were sent to trial. The trial began in March 1992, using the videotape as evidence in the court.

On April 29, the jury announced the verdict acquitting the four police officers of the assault charges against them. The response to the verdict was instant and the enraged protesters took to the streets, while others headed to the Los Angeles County Courthouse to protest the verdict. The events grew violent, as residents started attacking motorists, firebombing the buildings, and attacking the Parker Center Police headquarters in downtown Los Angeles (History.com par.10).

The riots lasted for four days and the damage they left was massive. They resulted in 2,000 injuries, 12,000 arrests, and 63 deaths. Buildings were burned and

businesses were damaged leaving more than 20.000 people unemployed (History.com par.11). The Los Angeles riots of 1992, in addition to the civil unrests that occurred in the 1960s, remain a notable station in America's history because it debunked, once again, the extent to which racial strife in America is intense.

1.9. Conclusion

The history of African Americans with law enforcement has its deep roots in the American history. Beginning with slavery, blacks endured the institution's brutality for a long period of time. When the American government decided to put an end to slavery, blacks were tormented with the practice of lynching. In search for better economic opportunities, African Americans migrated to the country's urban areas to find themselves facing the harsh realities of living and the over policing of their neighborhoods. Police brutality replaced lynching, as members of the black community became targets of repeated police shootings. Police brutality was not exclusive to ordinary citizens but it had also targeted organizations that were devoted to the improvement of the African American community. The FBI's COINTELPRO against the BBP is a good example. As America enters the twenty first century, the issue of police brutality continues to hunt African Americans which can be seen in the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement that advocates social justice.

Chapter Two

THE GENESIS OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

2.1. Introduction

In the summer of 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the case of the shooting of the unarmed seventeen years old African American Trayvon Martin, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter became viral on social media platforms. Created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the hashtag marked the first steps in the creation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement. The shootings of two other African American men, Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, at the hands of police sparked a number of protests, under BLM. As a result, the movement became widely recognized and gained the status of the twenty first century's civil rights movement. BLM devotes itself to shedding light on police killings of African Americans and advocating social justice for people of color.

2.2. The Trayvon Martin Shooting: the Catalyst of BLM

The shooting of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen years old African American, and the acquittal of his shooter revived the discussion of the role that race plays in the American criminal justice system. That February, 2012 incident became a social media phenomenon and a turning point in twenty first century America. The verdict that acquitted George Zimmerman was the driving force behind the creation of the hashtag that gave birth to BLM.

In February, 2012, Trayvon Martin was spending his high school suspension at his father's house in Sanford, Florida. Trayvon's father resided in a gated community that established a neighborhood watch, as a result of a number of robberies. On the evening of February, 26, 2012, Martin headed towards a convenience store to purchase

an iced tea. On his way home, Martin was beheld by George Zimmerman, the neighborhood's crime watch captain, who called the Sanford Police Department to report about "a real suspicious guy" who is "up to no good, or he's on drug or something" (Munro par.2). Although Zimmerman was instructed to remain in the car and to not pursue the suspect, he disregarded the instructions and followed Martin. The confrontation led to an altercation that resulted in Zimmerman using his firearm and shooting Martin leading to instant death.

When police arrived at the scene, Martin was already dead. When questioned by the police, Zimmerman claimed that "he killed Martin, who was wearing a hoodie, in self-defense after the teen punched him and slammed his head on the sidewalk" (Ford par.7). If Zimmerman obeyed the dispatcher's orders, the confrontation could have been avoided. Since the police had no clear evidence that could contradict with his account of events, Zimmerman was released without any charges against him because the use of deadly force was allowed in self-defense situations.

As Zimmerman remained clear of any charges, the shooting received a significant amount of public attention. On March 12, in response to the increasing demands of holding Zimmerman accountable of his deed, the chief of Sanford Police Department stated that Zimmerman cannot be charged because of the absence of a probable cause (Biography par.7). In April 2012, following the appointment of a special prosecutor by Florida's state governor, Zimmerman was charged with a second degree murder on the basis that the fatal encounter could have been avoided (Munro par.1). The trial began a year later and received intense media coverage.

The trial of George Zimmerman began on June 2013. The case divided the American public opinion into two factions; one believed that Zimmerman racially profiled, tracked and shot Martin and the other believed that the shooting was an act of self-defense. During the trial, the prosecution told the jury that Trayvon Martin was an innocent teenager whose death was caused by George Zimmerman racially profiling him as a criminal. Alcindor states, “Prosecutors throughout the trial have portrayed Zimmerman as a ‘wanna-be cop’ who followed Trayvon even after a police dispatcher told him via cellphone that pursuit was not necessary” (par.4). Because Zimmerman claimed that Martin had assaulted him while he was heading back to his track, the defense argued that the shooting was a self-defense and that Zimmerman needed acquittal. Following sixteen hours of deliberations, the jury announced the verdict, on July 2013, acquitting George Zimmerman from all charges brought against him.

The Trayvon Martin case is a focal point in twenty first century American judiciary history because it brought, once again, the discussion of race into the surface of the US society. The importance of this case can be seen in Barack Obama’s statement, “if I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon.” Obama, the first African American president, during whose office the incident occurred, made it clear that racial profiling was a fact of life that most African Americans, including himself, had to face (Munro par.5). BLM, a movement that espouses social justice, was born out of that tragedy to spot the light on the issue of the fatal violence that disproportionately targets the African American community.

2.3. The Creation of the Black Lives Matter Movement

In the summer of 2013, three community organizers, who knew each other through Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity, a national organization that trains community organizers, created a social media platform naming it #BlackLivesMatter. Alicia Garza, a worker rights organizer in Oakland, California; Patrisse Cullors, an organizer in the field of prison reform in Los Angeles, California; and Opal Tometi, an immigrant rights organizer in Arizona, responded to the acquittal of George Zimmerman and decided to create a campaign that aimed at protesting the devaluation of black lives in the US criminal justice system.

At the time of the verdict announcement regarding the Zimmerman trial, Alicia Garza was at an Oakland bar with her friends. In an interview with The Guardian, Garza remembers that night by saying:

Everything went quiet, everything and everyone, and the people started to leave en masse. The one thing I remember from that evening, other than crying myself to sleep that night, was the way in which as a black person, I felt incredibly exposed and incredibly enraged. Seeing these black people leaving the bar, and it was like we couldn't look at each other. We were carrying this burden around with us everyday: of racism and white supremacy. It was a verdict that said: black people are not safe in America (Day par.3).

Although America was headed by an African American president at the time of the incident, Garza's description of people's reaction to the verdict reflects how African Americans continue to feel unsafe and devalued by the system. To express her deep sorrow over the verdict, Alicia Garza logged into her Facebook page and wrote a post

that she called “A Love Note to Black People” to consolidate her fellow African Americans. She concluded her post with “Our Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter.” That concluding expression caught the attention of Patrisse Cullors who added a hashtag turning it into #BlackLivesMatter. Opal Tometi Joined Garza and Cullors; and the movement was created.

Similar to the Dream Defenders¹ and the Million Hoodies Movement for Justice², BLM is one of a number of freedom groups that have been created to protest the Zimmerman trial. Most of these groups used courthouse demonstrations and petitioning for justice through Change.Org. However, the founders of BLM recognize the efficiency of social media in setting a political agenda that calls for action and that goes beyond the methods utilized by preceding movements (Ruffin par.7). The three women who founded BLM created Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr accounts, and encouraged people to share their personal experiences with state violence. Thus, the Black Lives Matter movement began as a social media forum that transformed into one of the most influential movements in the twenty first century.

2.4. Black Lives Matter: from Social Media into the Streets

In the summer of 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, was fatally shot by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. The following day, in response to the incident, demonstrations erupted and escalated into intense rioting. Weeks before Brown’s death, Eric Garner, a forty three years old black man, died after

¹ The Dream Defenders was a group of students that protested the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013. They inspired the name from Martin Luther’s King iconic expression “I have a dream” (Herrera, par. 2).

² Million Hoodies March is human rights group that was founded following the acquittal of George Zimmerman to protest police violence directed against African Americans.

being placed into a chokehold by a police officer in Staten Island, New York (Simon par.7). With these deaths and the responses that followed, it seemed that history was repeating itself with racial strife reaching its apex in twenty first century America.

Once again, these highly profiled killings of unarmed African Americans and the failure of the criminal justice system to indict the police officers that claimed their lives fueled the rage of the black community. That shed light on a serious issue in the United States. In the wake of these events, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi decided to take their campaign into another level by organizing a peaceful “Freedom Ride” to Ferguson under the #BlackLivesMatter (Day par.7). Therefore, the Freedom Ride to Ferguson was the first time that BLM transformed from a social media campaign into an actual movement that organized freedom marches in the streets. More than five hundred BLM members from eighteen different cities participated in the peaceful march reflecting the rapid growth of the movement.

Similar to the rest of the protesters, BLM members were enraged by the shooting of the unarmed teenager and by the fact that the authorities had left his body in the street for four hours before it were moved to the city’s morgue. In commenting on the incident, Garza asserts that “When you leave somebody’s body in the street for four and a half hours, steps away from his mother’s house, for everybody to see, it’s a message. It’s not an accident” (7). The scene of Michael Brown’s dead body left in the street was documented through cell phones and broadcasted via social media. That resulted in months of protests, and “Black Lives Matter” was the phrase that the protesters chanted to reflect their rage.

When Officers Darren Wilson was acquitted in the case of Michael Brown shooting, BLM organizers initiated a protest strategy that captured a significant attention. On the Black Friday of November 28, 2014, BLM demonstrators, wearing Black Lives Matter T-Shirts, affixed themselves into the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station platform in Oakland, California. Alicia Garza, a co-founder of the movement who led the demonstration, asserts that “Black Friday for us was important because state violence is of course rooted in an economic system that prioritizes profits over people” (11). As the Black Friday is one of the busiest shopping seasons, it was the perfect timing for BLM organizers to take action and to spread their message to a larger number of people. Syracuse University historian Herbert Ruffin argues that the BART shutdown was significant because it reminded shoppers that police brutality, inadequate health care services, and poor education were serious issues that needed to be addressed at a national level (5).

The Black Friday demonstration was important to BLM’s work on the ground for a number of reasons. First, since Alicia Garza was present at the demonstration, it reflected how the founders of the movement were directly involved in the action. Second, it demonstrated the founders’ competence when it comes to organizing. Three, the timing and location of the demonstration highlighted the cleverness of the organizers and reflected their strategic thinking and determination when it comes to spreading the message of the movement. Therefore, as one of the early demonstrations organized by BLM, the BART shutdown was a strategic step that helped the movement to grow into national prominence (Chase 14-15).

As a result of Brown's death and the protests that followed, the Department of Justice released a report that proved that the courts of Ferguson and the Ferguson Police Department had targeted African American citizens through arrests and fines. Therefore, in December 18, 2014, the U.S Congress issued the Death and Custody Reporting Act. The new federal legislation required states to provide reports about deaths at the hands of the police or during the process of the arrest (Ruffin par.9). Despite these attempts, the death of black citizens at the hands of police continued to occur and BLM continued to grow.

While BLM emerged as one of a number of organizations that protested police brutality in 2014, it was successful enough to grow into a well-recognized national movement. By 2015, the phrase BLM became the symbol of people's protest against the use of lethal force by the police. Its use of social media to mobilize people and raise their awareness about the problems that persist in the black communities have helped the movement to develop into a black liberation project. The founders of BLM have created an official website for the movement in which they detail their plans and approach to leadership and organizing. This website serves as an official platform for the movement which enables its visitors to gain more perspectives about BLM.

2.5. The Black Lives Matter as a Global Network

As stated on its website, BlackLivesMatter.com, BLM is a member led global network that is constituted of more than forty chapters. The mission of its members is to "organize and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes." BLM's mission is to ideologically and politically intervene

“in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise.” The organizers continue to assert in the website that BLM’s goal is to affirm the humanity of African Americans and to highlight the importance of the contributions they make in society.

According to the Herstory section of the website, the members of BLM are organizers who work with everyday people and who are fully aware of the gaps those previous Black liberation movements had created. Unlike those movements that centered on heterosexual cisgender men and excluded women, queer, and transgender people, BLM organizers stress the importance of incorporating these people in the movement’s fight for freedom in order to “maximize the movement’s muscle” and to “place those at the margins closer to the center.” (par.2).

In the movement’s website, BLM organizers highlight how the events that took place in Ferguson played a pivotal point in the movement’s history. For them, Michael Brown’s death and the harsh responses of law enforcement and media to the protests that the enraged Ferguson community held inspired BLM’s Freedom Ride to Ferguson as one of the movement’s actions on the ground. According to BLM organizers, “Ferguson was not an aberration, but in fact, it was a clear point of reference to what was happening to Black communities everywhere”. After the Freedom Ride, the organizers that came from 18 cities decided to develop BLM chapters in their communities and to broaden the political will of the movement.

BLM organizers state the importance of organizing and building Black power across the United States. The Black Lives Matter Global Network was built to support

new Black leaders and to empower the black communities. In their final statement, the founders give credit to the St. Louis and the Ferguson communities who protested under the BLM and who were the main reason behind the movement's prominence.

2.6. The Backlash against the Black Lives Matter Movement

The election of Barack Obama as the first African American president reinforced the claim that America is a post-racial and a colorblind nation. Therefore, the rise of Movement that coincided with the second Obama presidency exposed the movement to a massive backlash. The backlash against the BLM included twisting the name of the Black Lives Matter movement into "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter" (Smith par.1). These two responses had a major impact on how the public's perception of the movement and the political response to it.

The phrase "All Lives Matter" is a prominent critique to BLM. Those who use this phrase claim that the issue of race in America is obsolete and that the movement is attempting to create a racial divide in the American society. Rudy Giuliani, a former mayor of New York, stated that BLM is "inherently racist" because "it divides us...All lives matter: White lives, Black Lives, all lives" (Lim par.1). Similar to Giuliani, people who espouse a colorblind rhetoric, hold a strong belief that America had moved beyond race that a movement like BLM is no longer needed.

David Smith, a senior lecturer in American politics and foreign policy at the University of Sydney, argues that "All Lives Matter" as a backlash against BLM is only an attempt to erase a long history of inequality in America. He further argues that it

diminishes the issue of racism into personal prejudice in which African Americans are aggressors against a post-racial society in which race is no longer seen.

Between 2014 and 2016, murders of several police officers occurred in New York, Dallas and Baton Rouge. Although these murders had been committed by separate individuals, BLM was blamed for promoting hate against police officers and exposing their lives to danger (Smith par.6). The phrase “Blue Lives Matter” became the response of law enforcement to BLM’s agenda against police brutality. In response to the allegations that held BLM responsible for promoting police hate crimes, BLM activists released an official statement that reads:

We are targeting the brutal system of policing, not individual police. We seek a world in which All Black Lives matter, and racial hierarchy no longer organizes our lives or yours. This is a vision of love. As Black survivors of white supremacy, our hearts go out to all victims of violence (Qtd.in Lussenhop par.4).

The backlash against BLM is a reflection of the movement’s deep impact. BLM is working for a peaceful society in which the historically constructed issues are eliminated.

2.7. Conclusion

The Black Lives Matter, both as a phrase and a hashtag, originated in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman. Founded by three female African American radical organizers, BLM started as social media campaign that challenged the fatal shootings of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police. Following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, the movement transformed from a social

media campaign into a rallying cry. The Ferguson Freedom Ride was the first prominent action organized by BLM activists which helped bring the movement under the spotlight of the mainstream American media. The movement's growth had been accompanied with harsh criticisms and backlash which is demonstrated in the "All Lives Matter" and the "Blue Lives Matter" responses. So far, BLM had grown into a Global Network of more than 40 chapters. The movement had organized over 1,000 protests and uses vast marches, rallies, and interrupting political conventions as strategies to spread its message. Therefore, the next chapter is dedicated to analyzing three selected strategies of BLM and examining their efficiency in addressing police brutality.

Chapter Three

BLM Framework

SELECTED STRATEGIES TO REINFORCE THE MOVEMENT'S AGENDA

3.1. Introduction

Since its inception in 2014, the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) had significantly maintained its position as a prominent black liberation movement. With the rise of BLM, history seems to repeat itself in America as the discussion of racial equality became central in a color-blind society that considers the issue of race an obsolete matter. BLM builds on the legacy of the earlier black liberation movements. In particular, it draws inspiration from Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Black Feminist Movement of the 1980s, and the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ) movement. BLM is referred to as “the twenty first century’s Civil Rights movement” (Demby par.1). However, its approach to leadership combined with its break from the middle-class traditions that characterized the earlier movements are clear indications of BLM’s self-proclaimed identity that does not necessarily replicate the old generation’s methods. The rapidity of BLM’s growth, its structure, and the strategies that its founders have adopted directed the movement into a path which the earlier movements have not taken. This chapter aims at dissecting the strategies of BLM, particularly, the movement’s use of social media, its horizontal approach to leadership, and its fusion of anti-brutality activism and LGBTQ activism. Furthermore, this chapter aims at analyzing the efficiency of these strategies in meeting the appeals of the African American community regarding the issue of police brutality.

3.2. The BLM’s Horizontal Approach to Leadership

By definition, the horizontal approach to leadership means decentralized, nonhierarchical, shared group leadership. It is also known as participatory democracy.

Through this model, all participants are equal where no individual is positioned to hold power over the others. The horizontal approach to leadership provides an equal space and chance for each group member to be creative. Ella Baker, a founder of the Students Non-Violent Coordinating Committee of the 1960s and a secretary of the NAACP, asserts that “Strong people do not need strong leaders” (qtd.in Ransby par.5). Baker’s sentiment is reflected in the organizational structure of BLM.

Although BLM falls into a continuum with the past black liberation movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement of the 1960s, it is characterized by the rejection of the old norms of leadership. According to the Herstory section of the movement’s official website, BLM founders realize the gap created by the top-down male-centered approach adopted by these former movements. Instead, BLM embraces a decentralized approach to leadership. By incorporating women, lesbian, gay, and transgender activists, BLM aims at centralizing the roles of those who had been marginalized by the previous movements through giving them a voice and an instrumental role that enables them to be actively involved in addressing an issue that touches off the African American community as a whole.

In an interview with the Guardian, Alicia Garza, a co-founder of BLM, states “We have a lot of leaders, just not where you might be looking for them. If you are only looking for the straight black man who is a preacher, you are not going to find it.” Garza’s statement reflects BLM’s structural uniqueness that does not center on a prominent charismatic male leader who speaks on the behalf of the whole movement. With BLM’s various chapters across the United States, the movement’s activists in each chapter are better able to execute their plans according the needs of their cities.

Therefore, instead of having one single leader that directs the movement, decision making is shared by the movement's activists. Commenting on BLM's horizontal approach, Barbra Ransby, a professor of history and gender studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, writes in the New York Times, "The idea behind that model is that when people on the ground make decisions, articulate problems and come up with answers, the results are more likely to meet the real needs" (par.4). By keeping the movement at a grassroots level, people become able to address their daily issues effectively instead of being directed by a leader that might not be well familiar with these issues.

The choice not to have one single leader that represents the whole movement is the result of a lesson that BLM's originators have learned from their ancestors' history. Looking back at the black liberation movements of the 20th century, the prominent leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were assassinated. Another black organization that was targeted by the federal government was the Black Panther Party. As previously mentioned in the first chapter, the FBI had targeted the members of the group and assassinated them in order to dismiss the organization. In an interview with the *CNN*, Patrisse Cullors, a co-founder of BLM, comments, "We don't have a one strong leader model. You can't kill the movement by killing the leader because there are many." Cullors' comment highlights the determination of BLM's creators to keep the movement alive.

Although the horizontal approach to leadership is purposely chosen by the founders of BLM for pragmatic reasons, it also exposes the movement to a number of challenges and criticisms. Through local organizing, BLM chapters attempt to operate

and create action plans according to the particular needs of each city's black community. As a result, with the emergence of new BLM chapters, perspectives shift which results in confusion concerning the movement's principles that leads to the public's belief that the movement is chaotic and lacks a consistent vision and goals. To defend the movement, BLM founders addressed this issue in various interviews. In her interview with the *CNN*, co-founder of BLM Patrisse Cullors states “. . . decentralization does not mean disorganization. We are highly organized.”As an attempt to bring clarity on the movement's goals, BLM activists established the Black Lives Matter Policy Agenda. It includes a list of the movement's basic demands and goals according to which the BLM's various chapters are required to operate.

As a result of the movement's lack of a centralized leadership, BLM is exposed to misrepresentation by the media. Without having an official spokesperson that provides official statements, the media turns to protesters, prominent social media figures, and celebrities to get comments on BLM. As a result, individuals who claim to be part of the movement and who lack a fundamental understanding of the movement's principles are prone to misrepresent BLM in media outlets. In 2015, protesters in St. Paul, Minnesota, holding BLM banners chanted “Pigs in a blanket, fry them like bacon” which resulted in the movement being called a hate group that endangers the lives of police officers (Lussenhop par.1). Although the protesters were holding BLM banners, the expressions they espoused do not reflect the movement's intentions. Another tragedy that was attributed to BLM was the murders of a number of police officers in New York, Baton Rouge, and Dallas that occurred between 2014 and 2016. Johnnetta Elzie, a BLM activist, told *CNN* that “When something tragic happens, we are all

blamed because there is no central leadership. We all take a hit.” BLM founders and activists are well aware of this challenge that results from the movement’s structure and are constantly attempting to respond to the falsehoods about the movement.

As a nascent black liberation movement, BLM has been described as “Not your grandfather’s Civil Rights Movement.” (Cobb par.1). Unlike the previous movements of the 1960s that centered on single leaders, BLM adopts a horizontal approach to leadership. Through this model, the movement provides a collective agency to the members of the black community in decision making and setting action plans to combat police brutality. Although BLM’s approach and its inclusivity helped the movement grow, they also created obstacles. Since the various chapters of the movement adapt their action plans according to the needs of the communities they serve, BLM had been criticized for a lack of consistency. The absence of a prominent leader leads to the movement’s misrepresentation, as the media turns to protesters and individuals who do not necessarily understand the real aims of BLM. Regardless of these obstacles, the founders and the activists of BLM continue to see potential in the decentralization of the movement. The horizontal approach to leadership enables BLM to be more effective in addressing the issue of police brutality because it empowers the local communities and gives them space to architect and execute their action plans in ways they see more suitable to their daily realities. The absence of a leader helps the movement to remain alive, given the fact that previous black leaders had been assassinated. Therefore, the horizontal approach is effective because it prevents the hegemony of one single leader. Rather it gives space to a larger number of people to take part in the movement’s lead. As a whole, the African American community is vulnerable to state sanctioned violence

which makes BLM's approach to leadership effective because it does not exclude any member from participating in the movement.

3.3. BLM Use of Social Media

From BLM's early days, social media played an undeniable role in the movement's growth. As previously mentioned in the second chapter, the phrase Black Lives Matter was coined by Alicia Garza through her Facebook post that reflected her disillusionment over the acquittal of George Zimmerman. With the rise of digitally native movements like BLM, it became clear that the role the social media extends beyond linking people for communication. Rather, social media provide a venue for their users to share their grievances and express their opinions over social injustices. Realizing the instrumental role of social media, BLM founders used them to scaffold a strong base for the movement's cause.

The fact that the discussion over police brutality of African Americans was pushed by the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter reflects the pivotal role of social media in the ignition of BLM as a movement. In fact, it is through social media that BLM founders were able to address their message and to effectively mobilize the public. Elizabeth Day writes in *The Guardian*, "A hashtag on Twitter can link the disparate fates of unarmed black men shot down by white police in a way that transcends geographical boundaries and time zones. A shared post on Facebook can organize a protest in a matter of minutes." Thus, social media have become an instrumental tool of energizing social protest and BLM is a living example of a movement that founded its path through social media.

The success of the monumental Ferguson Freedom Ride which BLM originators organized in 2014 to protest the shooting of Michael Brown was the direct result of the online campaign that laid the infrastructure for the movement to take action on the ground. In an interview with *CNN*, co-founder Patrisse Cullors states, “Because of social media we reach people with the smallest concerns of America. We are plucking at a cord that has not been plucked forever”, she continues, “There is a network and a hashtag to gather around.” According to PEW Research Center, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter had been used nearly 30 million times in public tweets (par.1). Monika Anderson says that the hashtag tends to pervade social media platforms after high profile killings of African Americans (par.2). Through social media and through the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, the African American community has found a useful platform to unite its efforts in order to combat the historically existent epidemic of police brutality.

Ethan Zuckerman, the director of the MIT center of civic media, argues that social media’s importance rests within its ability to highlight “different incidents that might have gone unnoticed.” (qtd.in Day par.20). Due to social media platforms, the stories of the African American men whose lives were claimed by the police were shared and the American’s public awareness over rampant police killings of African Americans. Thus, enabling BLM to prosper on based on a strong cause. Furthermore, social media platforms have helped the movement to gain supporters in a short span of time. Rachael Einwohner, professor of sociology at the Purdue University, states that “People who are tweeting or liking things on Facebook are also participating in marches. They are also having face to face conversations with their neighbors, and

calling their congressmen.” Because of social media, BLM united people from different walks of life to protest state sanctioned violence of unarmed African American civilians.

Although the use of social media as an effective tool to mobilize the public has provided BLM with tangible outcomes, it has also created a number of challenges for the movement. One of the most common challenges that might result from the use of social media is the government’s surveillance of these platforms. According to a report in *The Intercept*, the Department of Homeland Security has been monitoring BLM since the Ferguson protests (par.1). The report indicates that the Department is frequently gathering data on BLM using social media various social media platforms. As a result of BLM’s foundational ties to social media, the movement is frequently attacked on these platforms. As previously mentioned in the second chapter, BLM has experienced a massive backlash in the form of counter hashtags that had aimed at dismissing the movement’s message. To that end, BLM activists are constantly attempting to monitor online spaces and making sure that the movement’s central theme does not shift (Parker and Mcilwan par.2).

Social media platforms have played a central role in setting BLM’s agenda against police killings of unarmed African American civilians. Tracing back the movement’s origins, the phrase Black Lives Matter was born on social media and BLM as a movement was founded as an online campaign. The Ferguson Freedom of 2014 that marked BLM’s transition from a virtual movement into a movement that operates on the ground is the direct result of the online campaign. Because of social media, African Americans found a venue to express their frustration over the rampant police brutality in

their communities. Furthermore, social media enabled the movement's founders to effectively mobilize the public to take action in the movement's advocacy. Since BLM embraces a grassroots method to organizing, the use of social media represents an effective method to achieve that end. In other words, people from all walks of life can use their social media platforms to amplify the movement's cause and to spread the message that the founders founded the movement for. Without social media, the killings of African Americans at the hands of police would have gone unnoticed. Due to social media, BLM came to be one of the most influential social justice movements in the twenty first century (Ruffin par.6).

3.4. The BLM's Fusion of Anti-Brutality Activism and LGBTQ Activism

The fusion of anti-brutality activism and LGBTQ activism is an important aspect of BLM that the mainstream media overlooks. When the movement first emerged, it made systemic violence against black people the centerpiece of its cause. As the entire African American community is vulnerable to state violence, the creators of BLM architected the movement to be inclusive of all factions of the black community and the LGBTQ is one of these factions. In fact, co-founders Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors had been involved in LGBTQ activist movements and both of them identify as queer women. According to the movement's website, BLM affirms the lives of "queer and trans folks" as well as "Black lives along the gender spectrum." This fusion is interesting and it is reflective of the movement's tolerance to people with nonconformity to gender norms.

Primarily, BLM emerged as a reaction to the killings of unarmed African American civilians. Yet, the three women who founded the movement designed BLM to be an inclusive movement that espouses social justice for all sexes and genders. Under the umbrella of inclusivity, the LGBTQ black community becomes visible in the freedom fight and finds a path to participate in addressing police brutality that hunts the larger black community. In an interview with the *New Yorker*, co-founder Alicia Garza argues that the reason behind BLM's embracement of the LGBTQ community is because as black queer woman who is married to a transmale, she would have felt marginalized by the society and the organizations that are dedicated to social justice. When it comes to BLM, identity does not matter as much as the devotion to the movement's cause does.

Kathleen J. Fitzgerald, a Visiting Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Tulane, states, "Intersectionality¹ theory encourages us to be attuned to the ways multiple systems of oppression, such as race, class, and sexuality intersect with and influence one another, creating new forms of oppression" (54). Therefore, the inclusion of the LGBTQ people of color in the BLM's fight illustrates the movement's originators' awareness of the intersectionality of racial-based violence and gender-based violence. In an interview with the *New Yorker*, co-founder Alicia Garza stated that one of the misperceptions about BLM is that it is a "gay movement masquerading as a black one." However, the movement's basic goal is to highlight that the two aspects are not

¹ According to the Oxford dictionary, Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of race, class and gender which creates overlapping systems of oppression. The term was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a civil rights activist and a scholar. When she first coined the term, Crenshaw aimed at describing the oppression to which African American women are exposed to because of both their race and gender. However, the term became viral and encompassing to other elements such as: social class and nationality (Perlman 1).

mutually exclusive and that BLM is attempting to organize people “at the bottom.” When LGBTQ people of color experience violence, it is because of their race as well as their nonconformity to gender norms (Fitzgerald 54). Thus, BLM provides recourse for this faction to protest the issue of state promoted violence.

Travis Goza, social science professor in Africana studies at Cornell University, states that “Unlike the Civil Rights Movement’s emphasis on the politics of respectability, the Black Lives Matter has a populist, come as you are vibe that does not police people’s sexuality, religion, age, race, dress and speech.” (qtd.in Guynn par.6). Through allowing LGBTQ activists to be engaged in the movement’s quest, BLM extends its platform of public support and benefits from the expertise of these activists. For instance, DeRay Mecksson, one of BLM’s prominent activists, is a gay man (Day par.14). With a Twitter account followed by over 176.000 people, Mecksson spots the light on police killings of African Americans and keeps the issues related to policing at the center of his social media platforms. Activists who belong to the LGBTQ community are an effective aid to BLM, as they used their expertise in standing for the movement’s cause.

In addition to the anti-brutality dimension of BLM, the LGBTQ aspect is an important one. Realizing the intersectional nature of violence against black people, the originators of BLM designed the movement to be inclusive and created space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer activists to take part in the movement. In fact, both co-founders Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors identify as queer women. The fusion of the LGBTQ activism and anti-brutality activism is an aspect that the mainstream media often overlooks when discussing the movement. However, those who

are aware of this aspect accuse the movement of being what Alicia Garza described as “a gay movement masquerading as a black one.” Her central argument against that accusation was that the two aspects are not mutually exclusive and that the BLM is attempting to centralize the roles of the marginalized (Cobb par.11). Indeed, sexual and racial identities intersect. For that reason, the inclusion of the LGBTQ activists is efficient in BLM’s fight against police violence for these activists can use their expertise to set action plans that would benefit the movement. To conclude, this unique fusion that characterizes BLM illustrates the movement’s objective resolution in combating police brutality for it is an issue to which the entire African American is vulnerable.

3.5. Conclusion

The Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) has prominently maintained its position as a non-violent movement that addresses social justice in twenty-first century America. In addition to building on the legacy of its ancestor movements, BLM has developed a number of modern strategies to promote its agenda. Particularly, BLM embraces a horizontal approach to leadership; it uses social media to mobilize the public, and fuses anti-brutality activism with LGBTQ activism. Through its leadership structure, the movement remains decentralized and opens space for local organizing over national organizing. Instead of being directed by a national leader, the decision making remains at a grassroots level which is an efficient strategy as people develop action plans according to their daily concerns. As a digitally native social justice movement, BLM has benefited to a great extent from the use of social platform to promote its agenda. In fact, social media platforms served as effective tools to connect

individuals and to spot the light on the various incidents of police shootings. The success of the movement's work offline is the tangible outcome of the online campaign that BLM's creators organized. The fusion of LGBTQ activism with anti-brutality activism illustrates the resilience of the movement to address state-sponsored violence at a wider level. To that end, the founders were cautious not to prioritize one issue over another to avoid the movement's failure. Through these selected strategies, BLM remains alive and adaptive to different contexts and its structure gives agency to everyday people to protest police brutality.

General Conclusion

The tensions that characterize African American's relationship with law enforcement are the product of a number of historical developments. By the end of the Great Migration, African Americans established their urban communities. In addition to the numerous challenges introduced by the urban life, police violence became a major issue facing black Americans. The maltreatment that African Americans received at the hands of police catalyzed a number of major events in the United States. The Detroit and the Watts uprisings of the 1960s, the establishment of the Black Panther Party in 1966, and the FBI's agenda against that organization are prominent examples. It becomes evident that the tumultuous relationship of black Americans and the police is historically constructed.

As the US enters the twenty first century, the issue of state-promoted violence against African Americans remains existent in the American society. The shooting of the African American teenager Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his shooter in 2013 stimulated the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM). Founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, BLM is the rallying cry that reflects the frustration of the African American community over police violence in twenty first century America. Although BLM is a peaceful movement that protests police brutality, it has been exposed to a massive backlash. Two of the prominent critiques of BLM are promoting a war against police officers and worsening race relations in America. However, the founders are constantly emphasizing the movement's peacefulness and highlighting its goals.

As a twenty first century social justice movement, BLM adopts a number of modern strategies to promote its agenda against police brutality. The use of social media

platforms, the horizontal approach to leadership, and the fusion of LGBTQ and anti-brutality activism are strategies used by BLM to confront police violence. By analyzing these three selected strategies, this thesis has shown their efficiency in promoting BLM's agenda against police brutality. First, social media platforms enable the activists of the movement to transmit their message to a wide public. Second, the horizontal approach to leadership gives space to the activists and helps them to unite their efforts and architect action plans according to the needs of each city's black community. The fusion of LGBTQ and anti-brutality activism is a result of the multilayered systems of oppression. Through incorporating the LGBTQ community of color, BLM extends its platform of public support and makes sure that all factions of the African American community in the fight against police brutality. To better understand the implications of these results, future research could address the aspect of the horizontal approach to leadership and the potential tangible outcomes that this model could offer to social justice movements.

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